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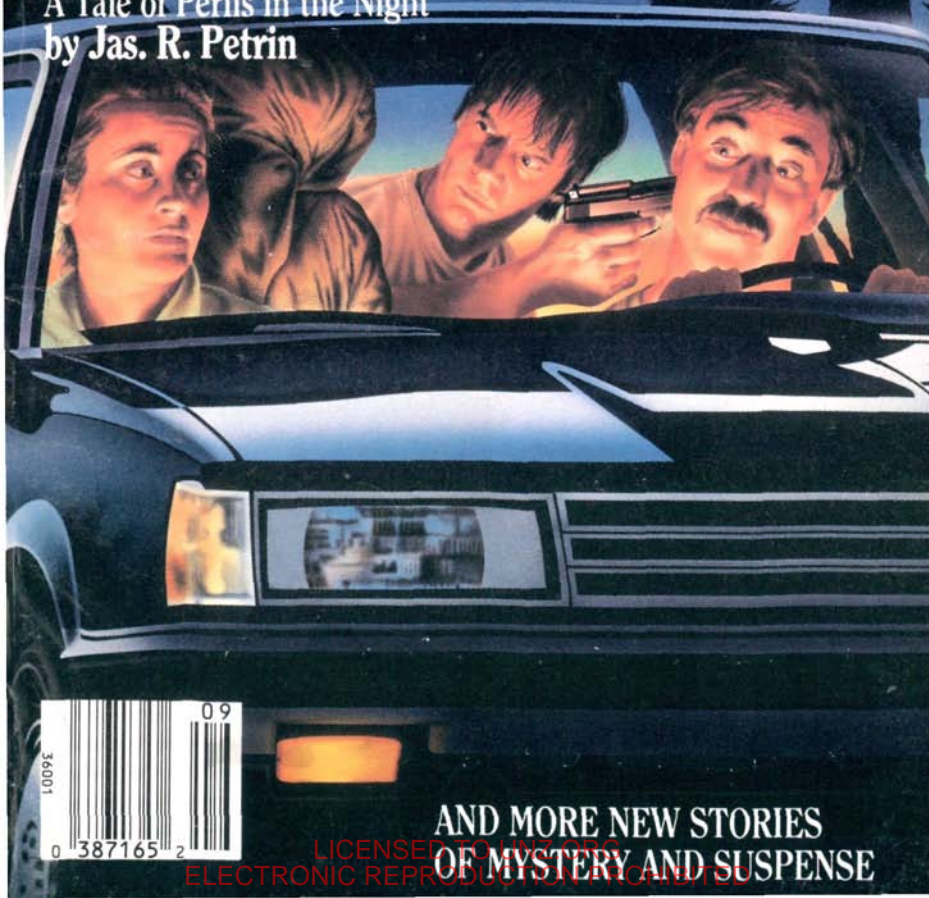
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THE KA

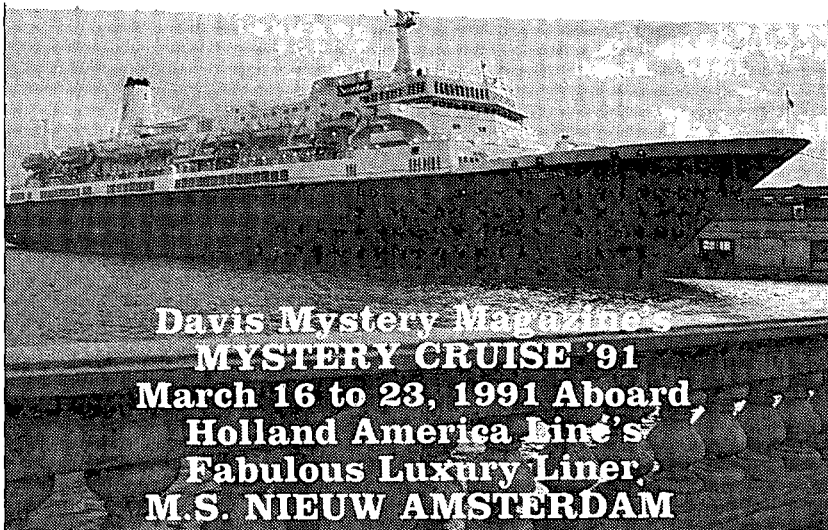
A Tale of Perils in the Night

by Jas. R. Petrin



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CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

THE KA by Jas. R. Petrin	6
RETRIBUTION by Edie Ramer	29
THE GOLDEN PARACHUTE by Martin N. Meyer	34
FATHER HUGH AND	
THE MILLER'S DEVIL by Mary Monica Pulver	58
SILENT WARNING by William J. Carroll, Jr.	70
CHECKING OUT by Nick O'Donohoe	113
SECOND NATURE by William T. Lowe	120
FRONT WINDOW by Dan Crawford	130

MYSTERY CLASSIC

RING OF LOVERS by G. K. Chesterton	134
---	------------

DEPARTMENTS

GUEST EDITORIAL by Mary Cannon	2
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH	69
UNSOLVED by Ken Weber	110
SOLUTION TO THE AUGUST "UNSOLVED"	133
BOOKED & PRINTED by Carol Harper	150
MURDER BY DIRECTION by William Heller	153
THE STORY THAT WON	155

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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Mary Cannon

The food was super the entire weekend. The banquet food actually tasted like something one would choose to order out in a restaurant. The dainties served at the high tea—neatly-trimmed cucumber sandwiches, a dazzling array of petit fours, and other mouth-watering morsels—well, my dear, Harrod's would have been proud. Charlotte MacLeod outdid herself at the Sunday afternoon tea in a hat sure to make even the lushest flower garden seem mean by comparison, while Elizabeth Peters (aka Barbara Michaels) swanned around in antique white. A tall, bearded butler gravely paced from table to table stiffly carrying a silver salver. On it, dead center, was a lifesized plastic skull. As he approached each tea-sipping fan, he would adroitly remove the

top half of the skull, droning in funereal tones, "Chocolates?" Inside was tiny skull-shaped candy. My, murder can be fun!

This was Malice Domestic II in early April in Bethesda, Maryland, the second annual convention of mystery authors and fans devoted to the "malice domestic" novel. (Let's not go into exactly what that may be. As one panel member quipped, we all seem to know when a book *isn't* suitable to this event, even if the guidelines for when one *is* are less defined.) To discuss definitions here would be truly to distort the spirit of the convention, which is as far from the idea of "talking heads" and "literary criticism"—or any other kind of criticism, for that matter—as one can get. This is a weekend in which the writers of books designed for our entertainment—for our fun, if you

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will—get together with their readers. The point of it all? To have more fun, of course!

And there's plenty of glee on hand at MD. I began with a discussion of the convention food. It's natural to talk about murder and menus in the same breath. There was, in fact, a Saturday afternoon panel titled "Culinary Crime: Food as a Theme in Mysteries." Panelists included Dorothy Cannell (*The Thin Woman*) and Diane Mott Davidson (*Catering to Nobody*), both authors who liberally spice their fiction with food. No one in the packed audience disagreed with the panel's conclusions, either. Food makes a super murder weapon; any MD member worth his or her salt will always prefer poison to Uzis. Surely I'm not the only mystery lover who munches her way through these books . . . ? Sigh. I think not.

For those of you who haven't ever attended a mystery convention, let me give you a brief rundown of the schedule for Malice Domestic II. Friday afternoon was registration, with mystery movies and several author signings scheduled simultaneously. From five to seven P.M. a cash bar was open in the hotel at a cocktail party called "Meet the Authors." That evening a panel of authors faced off against a panel of fans in a Mystery Bowl designed to tout

the trivia of the genre.

Saturday and Sunday were packed with panels. These put two or more authors and experts at a table facing a seated audience. Usually a chairperson led the discussions. Topics included the academic mystery, historical settings, sequels, cover art, mysteries without murder, and sessions devoted to Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers. Patricia Moyes ("Penny" to her friends) was the Guest of Honor this year, and one of the delights of the convention was the interview her old friend Sarah Caudwell conducted with her. Moyes spoke of her good fortune over the years, her "luck," but what we all heard was the story of a hardworking writer who has consistently produced topnotch crime novels.

Panels were identified with clever titles, as was everything connected to MDII. One can't really be too amused, can one? The combination of humor and murder was also the subject of one of last year's panels, which was reprised this year. "What's So Funny About Murder?" featured four ladies well known for their funnybones: Joan Hess, Dorothy Cannell, Sharyn McCrumb, and Charlotte MacLeod. Joan Hess denied any attempts at humor. "I can't help myself," she stated, and her co-

(continued on page 28)

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FICTION

The Ka

by Jas. R. Petrin

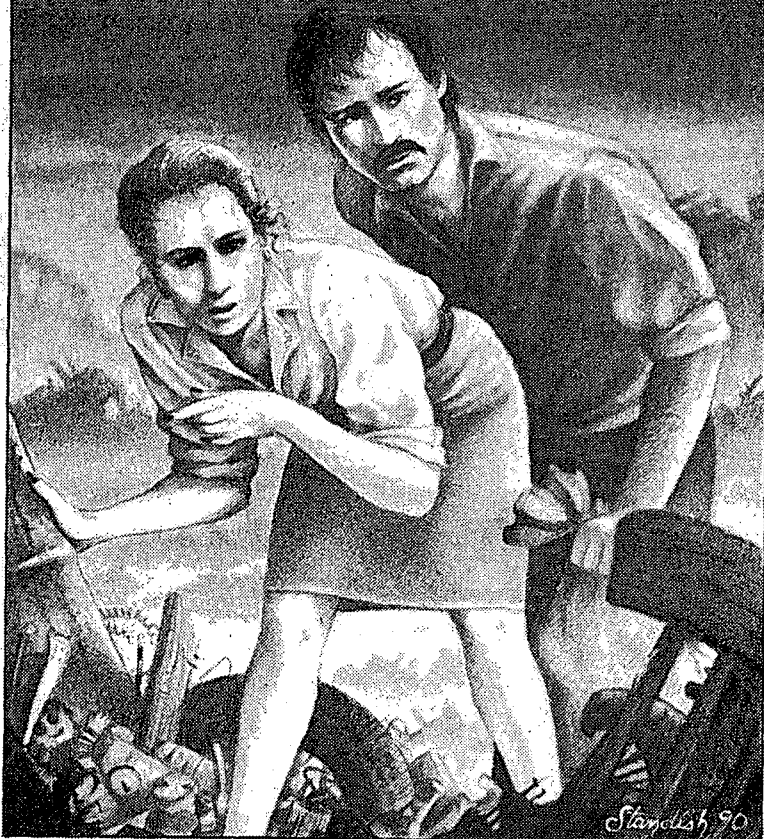


Illustration by Timothy Standish

6

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The car rushed up out of the hollow, crested the shallow rise, and the huge shell of sky where the sun had dropped out of sight showed them the highway still winding away over the arid treeless plain without relief.

"Get a air conditioner for the car, I said. We'll need a air conditioner in the car on a trip like this, I said. Isn't that what I said? That's *exactly* what I said. But *would* you listen? Do you *ever* listen? You *never* listen. You got the brains in this outfit. All the brains. You *think* you got the brains. No air conditioner. So now we're lost, baked like beans, no Holiday Inn—and just *look* at this stain!"

Robert Garvey tore his gaze from the darkening road and turned it on his wife, Sheila Louise Watson-Coker. She had not taken his name. Said that his was a size seven name, said that she needed a size fourteen. She stopped fanning herself with the outrageous tabloid she liked to read, and hoisted a sunburnt elbow to display a stain under her arm that was as rimed with salt as the hollows in the plains around them.

"See that? What you done to my dress? You got to buy me a new one. And no complaining. This heat! I could kill you. If

you'd of bought that air conditioner like I said, then—"

"I *was* going to buy the air conditioner, you cow. It was my idea, remember? *You're* the one who said it was too expensive."

"What?" She looked indignant. "You tryin' to blame that goof-up on me? Listen, if I hadn't of—"

She didn't get to finish. Under Garvey's inattention the car wandered into loose rubble at the washed-out shoulder of the road. It slewed to one side, careened left and right, and as Garvey fought the wheel a harsh metallic thump from below interrupted her in mid-complaint.

Another grievance.

"*Now* what? Can't you drive? Trying to kill us? Go ahead. Knock the back end of the car off. That's what you did. *Sure* you did. I *bet* you did. Pull over. Check it out. Fix it. The heat made you do that. You should of bought a air conditioner. Come on and hurry up and stop and get out and have a look."

Garvey slowed, pulled over. Stones popped under the tires. He turned off the ignition and the thick, late-evening prairie silence fell over them instantly like a great warm, muffling blanket. The engine ticked and cooled.

"I could kill you," Lou said.

Garvey looked at the shad-

owy, angular figure of his wife, who sat erect, glaring back at him in the half-light, bright eyes laden with undisguised reproach.

"Listen," he said, stabbing his finger at her as if it were a weapon, "if you know how to listen. It's *me* who's going to kill *you* one of these days. With gun, knife, poison—bang! slash! gulp! Hail and farewell, o woman of ten thousand miseries!"

Her stare never wavered.

"You gettin' out to see what you broke, or what?"

He got out, dragged his flashlight from under the seat, and went with crunching steps over the gravel to the back of the car, expecting the worst. Sounded like we holed the tank, he thought. Sure. Threw up a rock, I bet. Damn!

A sweep of the beam under the car confirmed it. There was the dent, the tell-tale dribble of liquid darkening the dusty bottom of the fuel tank. "Good news," he called out bitterly to Lou, "the tank's leaking. Now I can toss a match under the car and save myself the cost of your funeral — they wouldn't find enough of you to bury."

With a resigned sigh, he did a quick calculation. The gas gauge didn't work, hadn't worked in years; but he knew they'd filled up a good three hours ago in Medicine Hat, and so they

had to be down to less than a quarter tank. The only thing now was to make the best time they could and try to reach some sort of civilization before the car ran out of fuel.

He was turning away, disgusted, when his beam illuminated an object sprawled like an abandoned black bundle a dozen yards behind the car.

"Hey," he said. Then, "*Hey!*"

"What?" Lou shouted. "What are you hollering about? Want to wake the dead?" She got out, slammed her door and came lumbering around the car. Together they stood over the prostrate form lit by the beam of the torch, and Lou whistled. "Well, you've really gone and done it this time, ain't you?"

Garvey was staggered.

"Me? What d'you mean? You think I hit him? I didn't hit him. I hit a rock. There's a hole in the tank to prove it. I veered left when I heard that clunk. I must've drove right around him. Don't tell *me* I ran over this . . . this person."

"Well, you did," Lou said, "so you better do something about it. Is he alive?"

"I don't know."

"Well, what are you standing there for? Check him out. Feel his wrist. Feel his neck. Hurry."

Garvey did as instructed.

"He's cold. Cold as a cutlet. At

least that proves I didn't run him over."

"No, it don't." Lou glanced suspiciously around them, as if there might be witnesses. Then she plodded back to the car, threw open the trunk, and rummaged in it. She came back shaking out one of the large jute sacks Garvey used in their market garden business back home in Lockport. "Good thing he's such a teeny little homunculus. Come on. Help me. We got to get him into this."

Garvey was appalled.

"What the devil for? We can't do that. We've got to call the authorities, that's what we've got to do."

But Lou was already wrestling the body into the sack. Scarcely knowing he was at it, force of habit, Garvey stooped to help her.

"This is crazy. Why are we doing this? Why?"

"Because we don't want you clapped in jail, that's why. Here, hold this arm. Don't you see what could happen to you? When I lift up, stuff in those legs—huh! short little things—must've had to stretch to reach the ground and walk. Maybe you'd like jail. Chance to get away. Chance to abandon me. Make me fend for myself. Dig and plant two quarter sections of vegetables on my lonesome."

"But what'll we do with him?"

"Take and put him somewhere safe. Where he can't get run over again. It's the right thing to do. It's what the authorities would do. Time he's found we'll be miles away. Tie it tight, that's it. Now let's get him to the car."

She picked up her end of the sack. Garvey hung back. "But this is wrong. I can't be a party to this. I can't do it."

"You should of thought of that," Lou said with a meaningful glare, "before you killed him. Now bend, grab, lift."

They found a place for the heavy sack, pushed it into the back seat because the trunk was so filled up with luggage. It slouched there in one corner like a slumbering passenger.

"I don't like this," Garvey said with a worried glance in the mirror. He put the car into drive and stepped on the gas, hard. "I can't believe I'm letting you talk me into this."

"Don't blame me. You're the one killed him."

"*I didn't kill him!* How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"You ran him over."

"I did not run him over! Did you see me run him over? Does he look like he's been run over? Is he squished?"

"I'm no doctor. Or undertaker. How do I know what a runover tiny man looks like?" She seemed

to brew for a moment, then she added out of the corner of her mouth, "Besides, you *could* of run him over. You killed the cat."

"I told you before, I did *not* kill that cat."

"You're the only one could of done it."

"Anyone could have done it. You could have done it."

"Only I didn't. So it must of been you."

Garvey pressed harder on the gas in frustration.

"Slow down," Lou ordered.

"Want to kill us, too? First a cat, then three people in one night? Maybe you'd like that. Maybe it'd suit you. Till death do us part, you said. *That's* what you said. *That's exactly* what you said. I was there when you said it. Now you see a chance to weasel out on me. I won't let you go to jail, so you want to kill yourself. You hear me? You listening to me?"

"I didn't kill him."

"Who did then?"

"I don't know. But he was already dead."

"What do you mean, already dead? Why would he be already dead?"

"Run down by someone else. Heart attack, murdered—I don't know."

"Well now, something you *don't* know. Murdered! Why would he be murdered? Who

would of murdered him? Guess you think there's murderers all along the road. Guess you think I might be a murderer."

"Anybody might. It all depends."

"On what?"

"On lots of things." He gave her a fierce look.

They rushed on down the road.

Garvey watched the needle of the speedometer climb to seventy, then seventy-five, and did controlled breathing exercises through clenched teeth. He did not want to run out of gas on a lonely road with a dead body in his car. He ground the pedal under his foot. The car hurtled into the thickening dusk.

From Lou's side of the car, thin popping noises sounded.

"Don't crack your knuckles," Garvey complained. "You know how I can't stand it when you crack your knuckles."

"I always crack my knuckles when you speed."

"And I speed when you crack your knuckles."

The popping noises stopped. Lou said:

"Where the heck are we? This ain't the right road. You should of turned left back there. I said go left. You went straight. Don't you listen? Don't you *ever* listen? You *never* listen. Now we're lost on top of everything else."

Garvey ate up the darkness

with his eyes, seeking that flash of electric light that would signal civilization.

"Crash and kill us," Lou said, gripping the dash with both hands. "Suit you fine. Get rid of me. Sure. But you're wasting your time. It won't work. This world or the next, you still got me. Death won't part us. I won't let it."

On they went through the night. The car must have loosened its muffler during the incident, for it suddenly came free, and then they were dieseling along like a tractor.

"I could kill you!" Lou shouted.

Then Garvey spotted a light. A distant glow, no more than a wink, there for an instant, then gone again. He reduced speed.

"That's better." Lou relaxed her grip. Her fingers left tiny clouded dimples in the green light of the dash. "What's worse? Running out of gas, or dying in a ditch?" Then she too saw the glimmer of light, and pointed. "Look! There! See? A light. Come on. Drive. Hurry. A motel."

And it was a motel.

But not much of one.

A sagging, one story, wood-frame structure with a ramshackle wraparound office. Exhaust thundering, they jounced in off the highway and through the weedy forecourt, clattering. The engine quit with one last

tremendous backfire that fled echoing into the hills like a mortar blast.

"This is great," Garvey said, collapsing against the seat and putting his hands to his face. "The car's falling to bits, we're almost out of gas, we've got a body in the back seat, and you expect me to sleep."

"The car still works, there's lots of gas," Lou said, "and the body'll wait till morning. Now get going. Rent us a room."

"I shouldn't have let you talk me into this. I should have insisted we leave that body where it was."

"Shows how much you know. Shows you don't know nothin' about a ka."

Her teeth came together with a snap.

Garvey sat slumped in the dark, listening to her breathe. He wasn't sure he'd heard right. After a while he asked. "A ka? You said a ka. What's this now? What's this about a ka?"

She stared back blankly.

"What d'you mean?"

"Don't be dense. I want to know what you're talking about. What's this about a ka?"

She shrugged, sighed. "That kinda slipped out. Knew you wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

She stirred. A creaking of springs. Then she picked the

tabloid up off the seat and flourished it.

"Read this and get educated. It's all in here. In this *Standard*—the paper you hate. Right after the story about the girl who gave birth to a fish. A ka is some kind of soul or something that you got—the Egyptians discovered it—and this woman come home late one night and found her boyfriend's body lying in her drive. Kind of shook her up, she says, and she left him there and went into the house to think. Says she got tired and fell asleep—"

"What? That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard. It makes no sense at all. Her dead boyfriend's lying outside in the drive and she falls asleep?"

"It's all wrote down here, isn't it? Ink on paper. Black on white. She was tired. Worked as a waitress in a bar down the road. So she fell asleep. Only later she got woked up in the middle of the night by this ka. It's like a spirit, see. The Egyptians . . . Well, anyways, this ka was ram-pagin' all over the house, smashing things—"

"How'd she know it was a ka?"

"She was a *Standard* reader. She'd been reading about kas. This happened last spring when the *Standard* was doing lots of stories on kas. This was her boyfriend's ka. She knew that right away. And it got after her soon

as she woke up. What a fight! Came for her. She fought it off. All over the house. Wrecked the place. Then it cornered her in the kitchen—"

"What did it look like?"

"Like a sort of mist. With a face on it. Her boyfriend's face. It come at her, she dodged, made a dive and caught it in a bag. A plastic bag. A K-Mart bag. Knew nobody'd believe her, that they'd blame her for her boyfriend's death, so she put it in the fridge for safekeeping. But the stupid police came, and after she told them all about it, they went rummaging and opened the bag and let it out. All they had then was a empty bag. But the ka followed after her. Rode to the jail in the police car with her. Came at her every chance it got after that. Wouldn't leave her alone. Followed her right into the prison, after the trial."

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why? Why would it do that?"

"Don't you listen? Because it figured she'd abandoned it splang in the middle of that drive."

"Brother. And you actually think that's true?"

"'Course it's true. It's in the *Standard*, ain't it? I told you before, they don't print lies. They *can't* print lies. If they printed lies, they'd get sued. Can I finish?"

"Sure. Finish."

"Later, this girl couldn't take no more. Went crazy. Tore her clothes off, screaming. They give her the latex rooms, the shock treatments, the whole bit. Nobody'd believe her about that ka. Finally she fought her way to a phone, called the *Standard* and told them all about it, and they got her a lawyer and she sued those police right down to their socks. What a story. Sold a zillion papers, I bet. But she lost her case. And she never got well. Scary. So, now d'you see? D'you see why we couldn't leave this man you killed lying splang in the middle of the road?"

He sat in his seat with his hands still over his face. His words came out weak and muffled through his hands.

"I don't believe it. I'm married to a madwoman."

"You *better* believe it."

After a long silence he said, "So you don't care if I go to prison after all?"

"'Course I do. I'm not diggin' all them vegetables by myself. Only this is more important. This ka."

Garvey went to the office, paid one night's charges to a kid with a complexion as mottled and thick as the pizza he was eating, then went back out to the car. He got in behind the wheel.

"We have to drive down to the end," he said. "Room—"

"You just drive right on out of here," said a completely unknown voice, and something cold and hard and very much like the barrel of a gun contacted the back of Garvey's head.

Garvey drove.

Lou said helpfully, "Won't give a name. Just call him the Gunner. That fits. Got in while you were at the office. Needs a lift. Wants us to take him somewhere. Mexico, probably. Like a taxi."

"Shut up," said the voice. "I'll do the talking. And why should I tell you my name? Just drive back up to the highway and turn left."

"But I've rented a room," Garvey said.

"It'll keep. We're only going a short ways. Drive until I say stop. Or else."

"Or else what?"

"Or else he'll kill you," Lou said. "What d'you think?"

"I told you to shut up," the voice in the back seat said.

They drove up onto the highway, and swung left. The sack fell against the man and he grunted and shoved it back again. They drove along without talking, the broken muffler roaring like a factory. The Gunner was the first to speak again.

"You got a broken muffler."

"Noticed that, did you?" Garvey said.

"You should fix it. It's polluting the environment." He snorted down Garvey's neck. "What a wreck this is. Noisy . . . Hot . . ."

"No air conditioner," Lou said. "Thank *him* for that." She indicated Garvey with a sideways jerk of her head. "I told him we'd need a air conditioner. Pleaded for a air conditioner. Think he'd listen? Does he *ever* listen? He *never* listens."

The Gunner gave Garvey a nasty poke with the gun.

"Maybe you ought to pay attention to her. She's right. You do need an air conditioner."

"Says it costs too much," Lou added in a singsong, mocking voice.

"Cheapskate, huh?"

"You can say that again."

"I'm not a cheapskate!" Garvey broke in. "And listen, pal, you better forget about Mexico. And you better forget about going too far up this road. There's a hole in our gas tank. We might find ourselves walking back."

The Gunner heaved himself up for a look over Garvey's shoulder at the gas gauge. The sack sagged against him and he straightened it. "Hey. We're already out of gas. This wreck's on empty."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. We should stop and turn

round and head back right now—"

"It's all right," Lou put in.

"What do you mean?" the Gunner growled.

"That gauge's been broken for months. Years. Don't pay any mind to it."

The gun barrel rudely found the tender spot on Garvey's head again.

"Trying to trick me?"

"Of course I'm not trying to trick you." In the darkness, under the dash, Garvey lashed out with the side of his foot and connected with Lou's shin; she gave a satisfactory gasp. "The tank really is leaking. I've got a flashlight. I can stop and you can get out and see for yourself if you want to."

"Sure," the Gunner said. He didn't sound pleased with Garvey's suggestion. "You must think I'm pretty stupid. Just drive. And shut up."

A mile or so farther on, the man they called the Gunner signaled Garvey with a poke of the gun barrel under the ear. "Pull over. Drive slow until I say stop."

As they rumbled slowly along the shoulder, the Gunner craned his neck to peer out all the windows—front, back, sides—like a man who is seeking a very specific place but can't quite remember where it is. Then he

ordered a U-turn and scoured the other side of the road in the same general area. Finally he told Garvey to stop and got out of the car.

He pushed the gun through the driver's window, held it to the side of Garvey's head.

"Shut off that ignition and give me those keys."

Garvey did as he was told.

"Said you had a flashlight. Give that to me, too."

Garvey gave him the flashlight from under the seat.

"And keep your headlights on. I'm gonna take a closer look around here—and don't either of you try running off on foot, 'cause I'm fast and I'm a damn good shot."

He walked away, past the front of the car and into the swath of the headlights, following the road and shining his torch into the ditch. It was the first good look Garvey had had of him. He appeared hard. Very hard. If you'd put him in a meat freezer for a week, he couldn't have come out looking harder than that. And like the tiny man in the bag, he was sallow and gaunt. Perhaps they were convicts.

"For God's sake, why'd you let that lunatic into the car?" Garvey demanded as soon as they were alone. "I can't believe it. I get out to rent us a room, I climb back into the car, and here he

is, gun and all. Can't I trust you with anything?"

"What'd you expect me to do?"

She began forefingering him in the ribs, nasty, sharp little jabs. "I was the one propped up slap-bang in front of him, wasn't I? I didn't want my I.Q. splashed all over the dashboard, did I? You're the one thinks he's got all the brains in this outfit, ain't you? Why the heck can't I trust you to do something?" She folded her arms and glowered at him. "Bleating at me like a grouchy bear!"

"Bears don't bleat."

"They might. If they were driving with you."

Through the windshield they watched the Gunner nervously stalking the shoulder of the road. Every few paces he stopped to aim the torch expectantly out into the prairie as if . . .

"You know what he's looking for, don't you?" Garvey said.

"'Course I do. Think I'm dumb? . . . What?"

"He's looking for his partner."

"So?"

"Our friend in the bag here."

She digested that, then said, "The runt you murdered."

"*I didn't murder him!*" Garvey snarled, rounding on her.

She didn't even look at him. She began cracking her knuckles. One after the other. Little succulent poppings of pain.

"No," she said, "you didn't

murder him. Chased him and drove over him and broke his bones and flattened him, but you didn't murder him. He'll be right as rain in the morning. Sleep it off in the bag, easy. Huh."

Garvey sagged forward, bowing over the wheel like a penitent and pressing his fevered brow against it. Couldn't anything go right? He felt as if he could weep.

"I don't know who's worse," he said, "you or that maniac out there with the gun."

"I am," she said with unshakable conviction.

“What's the matter with this thing? It keeps falling over on me."

The Gunner was back in the car, and they were sitting at the side of the road, going nowhere, while he decided what they were going to do next.

"What's in this thing, anyway?" the Gunner asked irritably. He gave the sack another hard shove, attempting to fix it into a more stable position.

Garvey and Lou exchanged a glance. Garvey shrugged.

"Just some old sack we were hauling out to the nuisance grounds," Lou said. Then, to change the subject, "What the heck were you looking for out there, anyway?"

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing. Only if we knew what it was you were trying to find, we could maybe help you, couldn't we?"

The Gunner thought about that. Sat with his elbows crossed over the back of the seat, breathing down their necks; there was a faint suggestion of mint on his breath. "All right," he said finally, "I'm looking for a friend of mine. He was supposed to . . . meet me here near the junction. I'm starting to think something's happened to him."

"What could happen?" Garvey asked innocently.

"That's what I'm wondering." The Gunner aimed his weapon at the windscreen as if he meant to blow a hole in it. "Drive farther up. I better have me one more look."

They drove a hundred yards farther up the road, and again the Gunner left them and got out to examine the landscape.

"You know," Garvey said reflectively, "with an armed man in here with us, threatening to kill us at any moment, you'd think we could cooperate. Why do we fight?"

"Why do we fight? It's you that fights. If you were the last man in the world, you'd fight. You'd fight by yourself. Don't look at me. Look in a mirror. Give yourself a hit. You got it coming." She glared at him over

the pouches of her eyes. "If you hadn't of killed the midget—"

"I didn't kill him," Garvey said weakly.

"You might of. You killed my cat."

"I had nothing to do with your cat."

"You hated it. Then it died."

"I never went near it."

"Then how did you kill it?"

"*I didn't kill that damn cat!*"

"Look how mad you get. That proves it."

There was no possibility of reason here, nothing with him in the car but truculence. You couldn't talk to that. He sank into silence. Out on the highway the Gunner scoured the night.

"What'll we do when he gets back in?" Lou said after a time.

"That's a good question."

"That's why I asked it." She shifted and the car shook. "We got to do something. We don't want to wind up like one of those unexplained bodies in the *Standard*. The ones they find locked up in suitcases." She shook her head. "I should get it over with, tell him to go ahead and have a look in your bag."

"My bag? Now it's *my* bag? You mean *our* bag, don't you? You helped shove his partner's body into it. In fact, it was your idea in the first place."

"I didn't aim the car at him. Chase him down the road and kill him. You did that."

The Gunner had turned and was plodding back towards them, now just a few dozen yards away.

"That bag. The damn thing keeps falling on him," Garvey said worriedly. "He's bound to get curious, start poking into it. We've got to get rid of it. Quick. Lend a hand."

They both got out. Lou lumbered around the rear of the vehicle to Garvey's side, and together they got the back door open and tumbled the sack out onto the ground. Together they dragged it to the edge of the ditch.

"This is wrong," Lou said. "Its ka won't like it."

The Gunner had seen the car's courtesy light blink on. "Hey," he shouted, a tiny voice in the huge prairie night. "Hey!" He started to run.

"Push!" Garvey ordered. "Roll. Quick!"

Together they pushed and rolled the bagged body, sent it tumbling down the steep slope into the gully.

"What's going on?" The Gunner drew up panting. He was wild with suspicion, flourishing the gun about.

Garvey began a reply; words failed him, he looked to Lou for help. She took a step forward with her jaw shoved out.

"What're you all excited about? We just got rid of some rubbish, that's all—that bag that kept

falling on you. Making more room. Thought you'd appreciate it. It's a long way to Mexico." She jerked her chin at the open rear door of the car, indicating the now-empty back seat. "See? Now you can stretch out and take it easy."

"Take it easy! I *can't* take it easy. How can I take it easy when I got to watch you two all the time." He turned and peered down into the ditch. "You can't just toss things out of the car like that. It's littering." He pointed the gun. "Get down there, both of you, and fetch that bag back here. We'll drop it off at a dump. There must be a proper dump around here some place. We'll get rid of it there. Come on. Get moving. Go!"

"Of all the maniac gunmen in the world," Garvey grumbled softly to Lou, "you had to find us an environmentalist."

The Gunner brandished the gun at them like a conductor's baton, and they hurriedly moved to the brink of the slope. Garvey plunged at once down the embankment a few yards, then turned to see how Lou was managing. She was poised at the top, an ungraceful figure, one exploratory foot poised over the dusty precipice, the other planted fast on the relative safety of the shoulder, hands trying to pluck some balance from the air. The

Gunner put his foot on her rump and shoved.

She went over like a toppled boulder and came down the slope like a landslide in a dress; Garvey had to leap to one side to save himself. She wound up face down at the bottom, draped over the sack.

"Now haul that thing back up here," the Gunner shouted.

They drove past the junction where Lou had wanted Garvey to turn left, past the lighted sign of the motel where their room waited with its soft, welcoming beds. Garvey saw again that the lot was empty.

"Where's your own car?" he asked.

"Don't have one. We were hitching."

"How did you get separated?"

"Had an argument."

"So you went on ahead and left your friend back there?"

"What are you—a cop?" the Gunner suddenly flared. "Just drive the car." He was half leaning against the sack. "There's got to be a dump near here. Every town's got one."

"I don't see any town," Lou put in.

"There's that motel, isn't there? It's got garbage."

"It is garbage," Garvey said.

"Drive. Drive, will you?"

"Good thing you're trying to

find your friend," Lou said. "If you was to abandon him, and something was to happen to him, then you might have to worry about his ka."

Garvey groaned.

"Ka? What's that? What's she talking about?" The Gunner wanted an answer. He swung the gun in Garvey's direction, pushing it into his ear.

"Ask her. She reads junk tabloids," Garvey explained. "What's worse, she takes them seriously. And please stop pointing that thing at me."

"He can point it where he likes," Lou reminded him.

As if to prove it, the Gunner swung the gun back at her. "You tell me. What are you talking about? What's this ka business?"

Lou folded her hands in her lap and stared out at the road.

"Just an article in the paper. You might not understand it."

Garvey brayed laughter. The gun leapt to his ear again.

"What's the gag?"

"Nothing. Well . . . something. I mean, what she said, it's too much. The only thing you mightn't understand about that crummy paper is why so many idiots read it."

"What crummy paper?"

"Tell him, Lou. What's the name of that scandal sheet? I always get it wrong. The *Nationally Slandered*—?"

"It's called," Lou broke in testily, "the *National Standard*. And it prints the truth. The *whole* truth. *Nothing* but the truth. Things other papers don't want the public to know."

The Gunner was nodding. Garvey could see his pale, bobbing face in the mirror, lit by the glow of the instrument lights. A prognathic face, like an anthropological reconstruction. The Gunner said, "My mom reads the *Standard*. I read it, too. They got lots of good exposes on industrial polluters." He prodded Garvey. "Watch those cracks about idiots!" To Lou he said, "Now I remember something about kas. It went on for months. What was it about?"

They rumbled along the midnight road, watching for a dump. The Gunner lay sprawled all the way back against the sack now, using it for a cushion, ready to listen.

"Well," Lou said, "your basic ka, it's a sort of a spirit, see—"

"Like a ghost?"

"Worse."

"Worse than a ghost?"

"Worse. Like everything that person was before they died, only just the mean side of it all, come back with its sleeves rolled up, crazy to get even, looking for an axe. Your basic ghost is one thing. You can put up with your basic ghost. All moans and

chains. But a ka, now that's a thing off a different shelf."

"Ghosts can be mean," the Gunner said, as if defending a home team. "Ghosts can be real mean. I've read about ghosts in the *Standard* too."

"A ka will eat a ghost for breakfast," Lou said with authority. "Happens all the time. That's what makes it so dangerous. Kill you if you cross it, then come after your immortal spirit and take care of that, too."

Garvey had subtly shifted the mirror so that he could watch the Gunner. The man rode along in silence for a while, eyes staring, listening and thinking, one arm thrown around the bulging bag beside him. He seemed totally caught up in what Lou was telling him.

"Why, though? Why would it do that?"

"To get even. Settle up. If you done it dirt in real life, look out." She smacked the rolled up tabloid with the back of one hand. "They especially don't like to be abandoned. It's all right here, all the latest if you want to read about it. All true. They can't print it if it ain't true, you know. There's a law."

The Gunner leaned forward, peering at the tabloid over the back of the seat. She offered it to him. He seemed about to take it, then fell back into the cushions again.

"No, thanks." He sounded unnerved.

"Don't blame you," Lou told him. "Scary stuff, all right. Awful."

They found something that looked a little like a road that might wind into a town dump; the Gunner asked Garvey for the keys, then got out to look.

"Know what I think?" Garvey said as soon as the car door slammed shut. "I think it was him killed our little friend there in the bag. That's why he was snooping into all the ditches, shining the flashlight around. Killed him, or left him dying, and forgot just where. Why else would he be doing that?"

"Sure. Kill someone, then blame it on a stranger. That's you. It don't surprise me."

"Look, for the last time, I didn't kill the guy in the sack! And I didn't kill the damn cat! But in a minute I'm going to kill you unless you help me think of some way of dealing with this armed maniac. Can you do that? —Please?"

Lou pulled at her lip.

"He's scared of kas. Like he ought to be."

"Great. Get him going on it again. You touched a nerve there. I sensed it. Scare the pants off him and maybe he won't kill us."

"And maybe he will. Anyway,

he reads the *Standard*. He knows all about kas."

"All the more reason to work on it."

The Gunner came back and handed Garvey the keys. "False alarm. Just a gravel pit or something."

Garvey put the car into reverse and, with his head out his half-opened door, reversed slowly and cautiously back along the narrow track they were on, to the highway.

"Where now?"

"Just drive. Until I say when. Once we drop off this sack, we'll see. Maybe I *will* let you take me to Mexico."

"With a leaking gas tank? A broken muffler?"

"No air conditioner?" Lou reminded them.

"Shut up about the damn air conditioner," Garvey said. "Tell us more about those kas. I was enjoying that."

There was silence from the back seat. But no protestation. The Gunner was like a child who waits to hear a story that he knows will frighten him. Dreading it and loving it.

"Let's see, now," Lou said, "the ka. Well, that's a thing none of us has to worry about."

"Why not?" asked the Gunner.

"Because we never did no harm

to no one. Never killed nobody. Never abandoned a dead body."

There was a long pause. Even over the raucous exhaust they could hear the Gunner breathing raggedly in the dark, his shaggy head was so close to the backs of their own.

"The Egyptians knew. That's why they built those fancy pyramids. You abandon someone's mortal body just anywhere—the temple of the soul, you know—that's the worst," Lou said. "A ka will get after you for that. Find you. Fix you."

Breathing.

"There's only one way out of it."

"What's that?" the Gunner asked so suddenly it made Garvey start.

"A confession. You got to make a confession." Lou plucked up her copy of the *Standard* and struck her knee with it. "That's what this girl should of done. Confessed. Asked forgiveness of that ka. That might of done it. She might of been all right then."

"You think so?"

"That's what it said in one issue of the *Standard*."

"I don't remember that."

"I do."

Suddenly the Gunner grabbed Garvey's shoulder so hard the car almost veered into the ditch. "There!" he shouted. "Right there—see? That road!"

Sweeping into view there was indeed a road. A narrow track leading through an unhinged gate, ending perhaps a quarter of a mile away in rounded dark mountains of trash. As they pulled off the highway, lit by the lights of the car was a sign that proclaimed:

NUISANCE GROUND
RURAL MUNICIPALITY OF OXBOW
NO DEAD LIVESTOCK
NO DEAD PETS
By order . . .

The rest of the words were too faded to read.

At the end of the track Garvey stopped, shut off the hammering engine. No one moved to get out of the car. The place crept with the light of the stars and the waning moon, shadows in a semi-alien landscape built with mounded human litter of such diversity it disoriented the eye. A mist filled the hollows. A smoking black pit fell away in the middle of it all like a crater caused by a meteorite. Or a bomb.

"I don't like it," Lou said.

"You're not supposed to like it. It's not an amusement park—" But Garvey was interrupted by the Gunner.

"I don't like it either. It's . . ."

"Creepy," Lou finished for him.

"Yeah, creepy."

"Well, anyway, we'd better get at it," Garvey said.

Nobody moved.

There was a scrape, a rustle off to their left as a small hummock of debris came loose and went slithering down a slope, making them all jump.

"Gravity," Garvey said. "Only gravity."

"Gravity," the Gunner echoed. But his voice was hoarse and dry.

"Well?" Lou said. "We going to sit here all night?"

The Gunner, perhaps shamed at her prompting, opened his door and got out. He stooped over Garvey's window with his weapon in his hand and said with bravado, "You two hump that sack out of the car. I want to take a look around." He stepped away, moving hesitantly, aiming the gun everywhere at once like a man who expects something to attack him at any moment.

Garvey had his fingers on the door handle when he glanced at the dashboard; he sucked in his breath. "Jeez."

"What?"

"Our friend the Gunner. He forgot the keys."

They both stared for a moment; a tumult of indecision rose and fell in them. The Gunner had paused and was glancing nervously around a few yards from the car. Then Lou said,

"Get 'em. Quick!" With a dry swallow Garvey pulled out the keys and pocketed them.

They dragged the sack out of the back seat and deposited it on the ground. Garvey stood, favoring first one foot, then the other, hoping the Gunner would wander farther off and give them an opportunity to leap into the car and escape.

"We can't leave it here," Lou hissed.

"What? Why not?"

"We got to drag it out of his sight."

"What for?"

"What do you think? Because we got to get back the sack. You don't want to leave it for them detectives to snoop and sniff and microscope and analyze, do you? In the *Standard* I read where they tracked down a killer from a sock in a thrown-away wash machine. Don't argue. Grab hold."

Garvey glanced down at the bulging sack as if it were something new, something to hate. Then he grudgingly took up his end again. Together, slinging it between them, they carried their burden away from the Gunner, working around the flank of the pit, breathing heavily as the track led them upward in a steep rise. The Gunner saw them at it but didn't challenge them.

On the far side of the pit Lou

put down her end, panting, and started back immediately. "Do it," she commanded. "Do it quick. I'll stall him." Then she was gone, vanished behind the mounds.

Garvey struggled with the knot. He had done a heck of a job on it—a sailor would be proud. His fingers grappled, slipped; he couldn't get a grip. Leaning over the sack, crouching, bending low at the waist, he found his kidneys were beginning to ache.

"Got to get him higher," he mumbled; and taking hold with a grip practiced by years of heaving sackloads of vegetables, he hoisted his burden up high onto a pile of rubbish that made up a part of the brow of the pit. This time he easily loosened the knot. The body tumbled out.

There had been no moon when he first examined the body, and now he could see it more clearly than he had with the beam of the torch. A small man in black pants and white shirt, with pale face and dark, staring eyes. "I'll go to prison for this," Garvey mumbled, "and I didn't even kill you." He closed the eyes, then turned and started back to the car, folding and pressing the sack between his hands. When the car came back into view he saw immediately that all was not well.

The mist was thickening. The Gunner and Lou were up to their knees in it. He had his weapon trained on her, and she was standing near the edge of the pit, arguing. He could see her hands move; that was her way, always her way, as if each word was a stick she could hit you with. As Garvey came hurrying up, she said:

"There. See? I told you he hadn't run off."

The Gunner waved his pistol angrily, signaling Garvey to fall in beside Lou. There was a wild, scared look in his eyes.

"Where you been? Sightseeing? Stand there and shut up!"

"I been telling him all about kas," Lou said.

"You shut up, too. I told you I've heard enough about that. You never shut up." He turned to Garvey. "She never shuts up," he complained.

"Never," Garvey agreed.

"Why'd you bring that back," the Gunner wanted to know, narrowing his eyes at the sack.

Garvey shrugged. "Why waste it? I can use it for something else. Conservation—you should approve."

"What now?" Lou asked.

"Now," the Gunner said, "we say goodbye. I need your car."

"What? Leave us here?" Garvey was indignant. The keys burned in his pocket. "You ex-

pect us to walk all the way back to that motel?"

"No. That's not what I expect." The gun seemed to grow a size larger. The barrel opening loomed like a pit down which one could fall forever.

"It won't help, you know," Lou said. "Killing us. It'll only make it worse."

"Make what worse?" The Gunner's face turned on her, evil and malignant.

"What you done out there on the highway. Killed your partner."

The Gunner's eyes bulged. "How do you know about that?"

"He told me. Told me all about it. I mean, his ka told me. I met his ka back there around the pit. Told me all about it. Mad at you, you know. Real mad. Bad enough you killed him, but then to go and leave the body lying there on the road like that . . . Guess you wanted a car to come along and hit it. Spoil the evidence. Fool the police—"

"You don't know anything! You can't! You're just guessing!" The pistol jumped in the Gunner's hand, and his eyes jumped in their sockets. "You don't know about Joe and me. Nobody does. I was the only one there—"

"Wrong. Joe was there. And his ka. And now his ka's here. It's after you."

"You're lying—"

"Nice fellow when he was

alive, I bet. Pleasant smile. Cute as a button. Just a little pidwidgin. About so high—" She held out her hand. "Dark pants. Light shirt. I saw him all right." She pointed. "He's waitin' for you right over there."

The Gunner stared wild-eyed over the seething, mist-filled pit, into the black of the receding heaps and hillocks.

"Why'd you do it," Lou asked, "and then leave him there?"

Suddenly the Gunner was shouting.

"It was his fault. He kept riding me. Kept going on about me. We'd been walking for two days, him blaming me for everything that happened. It was *my* fault his feet were sore. Everything was my fault, my fault, *my* fault!"

Garvey and Lou traded glances.

"Then he ran out of cigarettes. That was my fault, too—and I don't even smoke! He threw his empty cigarette pack down. Littering! I told him to pick it up. He laughed. He had the gun. He told *me* to pick it up. Then he started walking away, still laughing. Laughing at me. So I picked up a rock and—"

"You bashed him," Lou said.

"He deserved it!"

"Snuck up behind your own pal and bashed him on the noggin."

"He had it coming!"

"And him such a bitsy homunculus, too, God love him."

The Gunner shoved his pistol right under her nose. Beads of perspiration were glittering on his face. Lou went blithely on.

"Then you walked away and left him there. Abandoned him. *That* was a mistake. A bad mistake. A *big* mistake. You ought to of known better, you being a *Standard* reader. You ought to have remembered about kas."

"But I went back later—" the Gunner protested.

"Prob'ly to rob him," Lou said.

He looked horrified. "No! No! Not to rob him!"

"He thinks different. Another reason he's after you. Why his ka is after you. Go see. It's over there in that shadow, sharpening its teeth."

They all looked across the pit to the spot where she was pointing. And then a startling thing happened. A frightening thing. A horrifying thing. There was a movement, a slither and a rush on the far side of the pit as some of the loosely piled rubbish gave way, and suddenly the body of a little dark man with a pale, staring face slid feet first into view down the slope on the far side, and plunged down into the fuming caldron of the pit. It stopped when it reached the bottom and appeared to be standing there, swathed in vapor, glaring back at them.

The Gunner took in this apparition and made a little strangling sound. He cocked his head to one side. His mouth hung open. "Joe?" he said.

At the same instant Lou staggered back a pace or two; threw her arms straight up into the air, and screamed: "A KA! JOE'S KA! IT'S COME TO GET YOU! COME TO MURDER YOU! HELP!" She gave a sudden rush, colliding with the Gunner, who staggered even closer to the pit, unable to tear his gaze from the apparition. Then Lou was beating it for the car as fast as she could go, and with one quick and final glance behind, Garvey went pelting after her.

He had an impression of the Gunner firing shots into the deep blackness and screaming. Then a fleeting image of the pit ledge giving way, and the Gunner dropping out of sight as if some giant hand had yanked him downward by the feet.

And then they were careening out of the nuisance ground, exhaust roaring like an afterburner.

It was a peaceful sunrise. At an all-night Texaco a few miles up the road, while the attendant was filling the tank, Garvey made a brief, anonymous call to the police. Lou's idea. He related what had happened—almost. Didn't give

his name. The killer shouldn't be too hard to find, he told them. A man on foot, after all; and how many nuisance grounds could there be? He hung up quickly.

The motel they found was an improvement over the other place—and a hundred miles west of it. Sheila Louise Watson-Coker got stiffly out of the car, straightened herself in the parched prairie morning, and studied the long brick facade of the Econo-Lodge. Garvey, tumbling the bags out of the trunk, threw her a glare.

"What's the matter now?"

"I don't like it," Lou said flatly.

"You don't have to like it. We aren't going to live here. Only rent a room until the car is fixed. Lucky I spotted that gas station, that's all I can say."

Garvey staggered across the asphalt, burdened with bags, clutching the key. The door opened on a dark, curtained room, and he tossed in the bags and switched on the light. Lou remained in the doorway a long time, nostrils flared wide like an uneasy deer. "Know what I think?" Garvey said, bustling about the room. "I think that dumb girl in your stupid newspaper killed that boyfriend herself."

"Who cares what you think?"

He looked at her. "You look ridiculous standing there. For

God's sake come in and shut the door." He unpacked his pajamas. "She felt guilty. And if she thought any ka was after her, it was because of that guilt."

"You got all the brains in this outfit."

The toilet flushed. The faucet ran. He came out of the bathroom, drying his hands.

"That ka was her conscience. Same as with the Gunner."

"Think you do."

"But I'll admit you were right about one thing."

"You will, huh?"

"All they had to do was confess they'd done wrong. Confess to themselves, in my opinion. Face up to their own conscience."

Lou shrugged. "You got the answers. Think you do." She came in reluctantly and closed the door. "So, Mr. Know-it-all, answer me this—has it got one or not?"

"Has what got what?"

"This room. An air conditioner. Has it got one?"

"Don't know. Didn't ask. Don't see one. I guess not. Unless it's central air." He flopped down on the bed. "But we should sleep well. We're the only ones here, besides the owner."

"And his wife."

"He doesn't have a wife."

"He must have a wife. Look at those curtains."

"All right, then, he *thinks* he

doesn't have one. You can straighten him out tomorrow. Let's hit the sack."

"Speaking of which—what'd you do with it?"

"The sack from the trunk? Don't worry about that. It's back in the car, under the seat, I didn't leave it behind."

"That's a surprise."

Lou got into her nightgown and into the bed and they lay side by side staring up at the ceiling. Their elbows touched. They held hands.

"That's a stupid newspaper," Garvey said.

"If you say so."

"I don't believe in kas."

"So don't, then."

"A lot of nonsense."

Lou said, "That sun's rising fast. I sure hope you got us a air conditioner."

"Boogeyman stuff."

"Want to convince me? Or yourself?"

"Everything that happened tonight was explainable. Nothing supernatural. Just plain normal."

She rolled up on one elbow.

"Call that normal, do you? An evening out with a corpse and a madman? Dead bodies leaping? And anyways, how do you know it wasn't just how the ka planned it? How do you know it didn't use us to get back at that Gunner?"

Garvey thought about that,

thought hard, didn't answer for a long while. Then he said, "It's funny, you know, but I don't feel all that sleepy. My mind keeps ..." He squeezed her hand. "I

was just thinking—the Egyptians liked cats. Do you think ... well ... that it's possible ... a cat might have a ka?"

He edged closer on the bed.

(continued from page 4)

horts made similar claims. "I use humor to lighten tension during bad times," said Dorothy Cannell. "I think many people do. So it's natural to have my character respond to events with a funny quip." Everyone agreed with Sharyn McCrumb that laughing aloud during reading is one of the pleasures mysteries can afford us. (Charlotte MacLeod, by the way, revealed that a little wildflower guide has provided her with some of the delightful names in the Grub-and-Stakers books.)

What's a banquet without chicken surprise? (Answer: a better banquet.) So what's a banquet without awards? Something other than Malice Domestic, which gives out its Agathas in three categories. This year's nominees for Best Domestic Mystery novel of 1989 were *Naked Once More* by Elizabeth Peters; *The Siren Song of Murder* by Sarah Caudwell; *A Little Class on Murder* by Carolyn G. Hart; *Corpus Christmas* by Margaret Maron; and *Philly Stakes* by Gillian Roberts. Nominees for Best Domestic First Novel were *Grime*

and *Punishment* by Jill Churchill; *Working Murder* by Eleanor Boylan; *A Question of Guilt* by Frances Fyfield; *The Mother Shadow* by Melodie Johnson Howe; and *The Mark Twain Murders* by Edith Sköm. Nominees for Best Domestic Short Story were "A Wee Doch and Doris" by Sharyn McCrumb; "Live it Up, Bert" by Patricia Derozier; "Amanda" by Ellie Grossman, "A Cozy for Christmas" by Charlotte MacLeod; and "Afraid All the Time" by Nancy Pickard. I've listed the winners first in their respective categories, but I warn you: you'll find that voting for "best" among that list is a terrible trial. St. Martin's Press also announced the first winner of its annual Malice Domestic First Novel contest Saturday night; it was Noreen Gilpatrick's *The Pianoman*.

This year's convention designated Dorothy Sayers as "Ghost of Honor," and several events were designed to celebrate her books. Last year's Ghost was Agatha Christie; she was also lovingly recalled at this year's convention. Carolyn

(continued on page 33)

Retribution

by Edie Ramer



“I always say, if you want something done, you have to do it yourself.”

I groaned. “We know, Mom. You’ve said it a thousand times. Maybe millions.”

“Play the other side,” Dad said.

He laughed, and it felt good. It was almost like before that stuff happened to Amy. Dad and I were sitting at the table, the supper dishes pushed to the side so we could spread out the newspaper. He was reading the sports, and I was reading the funnies. Mom was cutting the ham, since Dad wouldn’t do it. I don’t even know why she asked. She could do it as good as he could. Better, probably.

I finished the funnies and watched the big carving knife cut a couple of pieces, each one the same size. In and out it went. In and out. Mom was skinnier than most mothers, but she always said she had strong wrists. Another one of those things she said a million times.

“You through with the funnies, Jeff?” Dad asked.

The front doorbell rang before I could give them to him. “You get it, Hank,” Mom said. “It’s probably the paperboy collecting.”

Dad was gone long enough for me to pick up the papers, like Mom ordered, and help her put the food on the table. I could hear voices in the living room,

and it wasn't the paperboy.

"Honey, the TV crew from Channel 5 want to interview us. I told them it was okay."

Mom just wiped her hands on a towel, then pulled her blouse down, but I could tell she didn't want to go. Though I look like Dad, I'm like Mom inside. Amy was more like Dad. When she was mad, there'd be fireworks. Wham, zowie, a lot of noise. Then they'd kind of fizzle out. Now me and Mom, we keep the hate inside, a slow burning fire, kind of like a barbecue.

I was just going to watch, but the TV newslady wanted me to sit on the couch with Mom and Dad. I wondered why they'd come. We'd already been on TV twice since Amy was killed, and I'd thought they'd have other stuff to do by now.

There was just enough time for me to comb my hair before the newslady started talking to the camera, saying who she was, that sort of thing.

"Here with me today," she went on, "I have the family of Amy Krause. Amy's tragic death on the evening of the seventeenth was followed by the arrest of her former boyfriend, Barris Regenlender." She turned to Dad, the mike under her mouth. "Mr. Krause, our Action 5 News Team has just been informed that the skin scrapings from under Amy's nails have

been accidentally destroyed. Without this evidence, the district attorney has no choice but to drop all charges against Mr. Regenlender. Would you—"

Dad howled. He sounded like some kind of an animal, not human at all. I wanted to put my hands over my ears. Then it hit me. They were letting Barry off. And I wanted to howl, too.

"—going to kill that bastard myself," Dad was saying when I got out of my thoughts.

"Hank, Hank, don't say that!" Mom cried.

But he did. Over and over.

Finally, the cameras turned off. When the TV lady left, she was smiling, looking real happy at getting down our anger and hurt. I wanted to punch the grin off her face.

Dad called the D.A.'s office and swore at them. Then my uncle and aunt and grandma and grandpa came over. Some man from the D.A.'s office came, too, and everyone jumped on him.

"I'm sorry," he said. He didn't look much older than me, pimples still on his chin. His eyes kept slipping toward the door. "We have no evidence against Mr. Regenlender. We have no case."

"He said he'd kill her," Grandpa yelled.

The man swallowed. "If we

arrested everyone who said that, there would be more people in jail than out."

"But my daughter *was* killed," Mom pointed out.

"Don't go on," Dad said. "They're not going to do anything."

"We *can't* do anything," the man said.

"Well, I *can*. I'm going to kill the—"

"Oh, Hank, don't say that!" Mom cried.

"I keep remembering her battered body. Her pretty face was almost—" He choked up and covered his eyes.

After the men left, Mom lit into Dad. "If you do kill Barry, you'll go to jail. What will that help?"

"If I know he's walking around free, I'll never feel Amy's at rest," Dad said.

"Neither will I, but I'll feel even worse if you're locked up for the next twenty years."

While they fought, I went to my bedroom and snuck a cigarette. My hand shook and I wondered if anything would be like it used to. Then I knew Dad was right. Not while Barry was walking around free.

Only, what would it do to Mom if Dad did kill him? He'd just told the whole world. Then I got a great idea. I'd kill Barry. Even if they caught me, they wouldn't do much. I was a ju-

venile, only fifteen.

I started planning. Barry worked third shift at the paper cup factory. He slept during the day and went out at night. The one sure time to catch him would be in the day. Maybe I could leave school, like at lunch, go to his apartment, kill him, and go back to school without getting caught.

Though I never did, other kids skipped out, and the teachers didn't mark them down. And I'd been to Barry's apartment last summer with Amy during the daytime. We hadn't seen no one but him. The people in the other apartments probably all worked or something. They couldn't pin it on Dad, either, no matter what he'd said, 'cause he'd be at work. Like the man from the D.A.'s office said, they'd have no case.

There was too much of a commotion for me to do it the next day. I went to school, but Dad stayed home from work. He was going to talk to the police, his lawyer, and the newspapers—really raise a big stink. But no matter how bad the smell got, I knew the police would do nothing.

Mom didn't want to talk to no one, and when I got home she was doing the wash. It reminded me of Amy. She used to tease Mom, saying, "Hey, Mom, I bet the world would fall apart be-

fore you did your wash on a different day than Tuesday or Friday."

Then Dad would say, "Leave her alone, honey. Without your mother, my world would fall apart."

I guess he's right. He's a big man, and when we're normal, he laughs a lot. It's Mom, though, who rules. I mean, *really* rules.

The weekend sucked. Dad cried a lot. Mom went around not crying. Dad yelled and talked about killing Barry. Mom didn't say much of anything. Me, I made my plans. I had to kill Barry before Dad did.

Monday wasn't a good day to kill Barry. He didn't work on Sunday nights and he might not be asleep. That was real important. I was going to sneak inside his apartment, using Dad's credit card. Then I'd sneak into Barry's kitchen and get a carving knife. After that, it'd be no sweat. I'd walk into Barry's bedroom, real cool, and stick him. Nothing to it.

It was a really crummy day. I skipped out of baseball practice after school. Just didn't feel like playing. Dad had gone to work, but he was home before me. I smelled chicken in the oven. A pan of brownies sat on the counter. I cut myself a piece, using the carving knife that was in the drying sink.

Mom came into the kitchen

and yelled at me for eating before supper. Looking out the kitchen window, I saw clothes hanging on the line. "Yeah, yeah," I said to shut her up, though I'd just swallowed the last bite. She was acting like nothing had changed, and when she made me set the table I slammed the dishes down. She yelled at me for that, too.

Dad came into the kitchen with the newspaper and sat down. Just like last week, we were reading the sports page and the funnies when the doorbell rang. We kind of looked at each other, then Dad said, "Maybe this time it is the paperboy."

He wasn't gone for more than a minute when we heard him whoop and laugh. He came running into the kitchen, grabbed Mom and swung her around. "He's dead! He's dead! Someone killed him today."

Still laughing, he set Mom down and turned to the two policemen who'd followed him into the kitchen. "And I didn't do it! I was at work all day. A hundred people can vouch for me."

I shouted, too. Barry was dead, and Dad and I hadn't killed him. Dad hugged me and we pounded each other on the back.

The policemen asked Dad a lot of questions. Before they left, they even asked Mom where she'd been during the day. Dad

was still going, "Whooh, hoo," when Mom said, "It's starting to rain. Take the wash down, Hank, please, while I get dinner on the table."

"I can't, honey. I've gotta call

Bill with the good news."

Mom shook her head and sighed, then started out the door. "I always say, if you want something done, you have to do it yourself."

(continued from page 28)

G. Hart is a longtime fan and admirer of Dame Agatha, and she noted that Christie's writing often seems to be a target of criticism. At the same time, she is a perennial bestseller, and who has a better right to determine what's "good" than mystery readers themselves? If the case for Christie's talent is so clear-cut, one audience member queried, then why does her work so often need defending? "Jealousy," retorted Hart.

There were lots of familiar names on nametags at all of the events. P. M. Carlson informed us that Maggie Ryan is coming back strong in 1990. Audrey Peterson, Janet LaPierre, and Dorothy Sucher joined M. D. Lake, D. R. Meredith, Jon L. Breen, Mary Monica Pulver, and Elaine Raco Chase around tea tables, signing tables, panelists' tables. Authors who attend this convention are there to mingle, and are truly gracious and entertaining.

Book collectors were having a field day, of course, and all of the authors attending (there were dozens) were scheduled

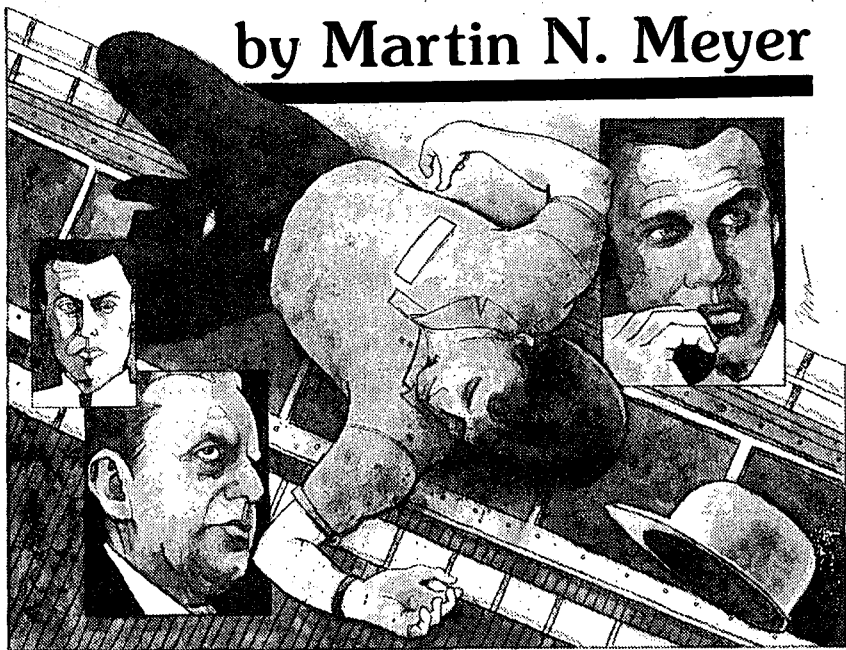
for an official slot in which they signed books. I found myself collecting quotes, jotting down quips in the margins of my program. Sue Dunlap told about taking a research tour through her local morgue. A helpful pathologist began talking about saving a poison victim. "The last thing I want is an antidote," she shouted at the startled M. E. "I want to know how fast, and how dead!"

Everyone all weekend contributed to the discussion of mystery fiction, why it's so addictive. Naturally the question of homicide—its gravity, our desire to see justice served—was part of the topic. Sarah Caudwell, a very witty and articulate professor at Oxford, summed it up neatly: "We will put up with people defrauding us. We will put up with people stealing our husbands and wives. We will *not*, however, put up with people killing us." Amen.

Malice Domestic III is in the planning stages even now. Last known address: P.O. Box 701, Herndon, Virginia 22070-0701. See you there next year!

The Golden Parachute

by Martin N. Meyer



The clatter of metal against porcelain roused me from a trance. I stretched my arms over my head and called down the hallway toward Maggie's sculpture studio. "What's going on in there, hon?"

"Just banging pots and pans together," came the predictable reply. It was a ritual of ours,

one of those marital dialogues that couples recite to reassure each other that all is as it should be, that the grounding is still firm. I smiled and saw, in my mind, Maggie smiling back.

Beyond the Venetian blinds was a late November day, but in my study the air was warm

and thick, and a latticework of sunbeams shimmered on the hardwood floor. My computer screen taunted me with last year's notes for "Intro to the Metaphysical Poets," but I couldn't coax a new idea from my mind. The telephone's ring offered a diversion from my torpor.

"I say, old boy, how are things behind the ivy-covered walls?" I never knew quite how to respond to the phony British accent; was it to be taken seriously, was it a joke, was it some eccentric idea of panache? It was Harry Simmons, a voice from the past that never seemed to stay there.

"Very well, thank you," I answered icily. "Look, Harry, I don't imagine you're calling to pass the time of day after . . . what is it, two, three years?"

"Two years and more, old friend. I say, you don't sound very professorial, you know. Do you talk to your students like that?"

"No, Harry, I guess you just bring it out in me. So let's skip the Rudyard Kipling act and get to the point."

"Righto. You know, prof, in some ways you haven't changed . . . still all business. Well, certain channels have put me in contact with an individual who requires some discreet assis-

tance which you may be able to provide." Oh, I sighed, the self-importance of this fellow.

"Listen to me, Harry. I'm an English teacher, I'm a professor, I have a wife and a house and two cats. And what's more, I have tenure. And I'm not going to jeopardize any of it. Past is past, Harry."

"This is a high level individual, prof." Harry went on as if I had never spoken. "He came to me in a very roundabout way, you know. I was recommended to him as a person who knows people who can be relied upon for a high degree of confidentiality." In translation, I thought, Harry was a sleaze broker. He did nothing himself, he merely linked up desperate people with shady characters who would do just about anything. And I resented being included in that group.

As he spoke faster, his accent began to fade. "Well, this individual is in need of someone who can do a little . . . poking around . . . and be absolutely trustworthy, 'incorruptible,' he said, because the stakes are very high, he said, and someone who can work with high level business types, 'move within executive circles,' he said. I thought of you right away. I told him you're a prof, and that was all he needed to hear. I

don't know any more about it; he refused to tell me a thing about what the 'high stakes' were." Whoever this person was, he seemed at least to be a fair judge of character.

"Tell him to hire a P.I. There are about fifty of them in the phone book. I have a class to prepare for, and I'm looking at a pile of year-old notes. And what's more, Maggie would kill me if she knew I was talking to you. Remember the last time I helped you out? She nearly left me after that fiasco. And I'm not an investigator. You know, Harry, a person needs a license to do that kind of 'poking around.' I don't see anything I could do for this guy."

"Oh, but you do, prof. And you can do it better than anyone, better than any P.I. for sure." The accent had disappeared entirely now. "You won't be investigating, you'll just be . . . analyzing the situation. Just like way back when." "Way back when" was during the war, when I had first met Harry, when we were in Joint Services C.I.D. together. I had been picked for it because I spoke French, the second language of Southeast Asia. Harry had been selected for somewhat less respectable skills. For two years that seemed like a lifetime we had been partners, shuttling to Bangkok or Singapore, Saigon

or Tokyo in search of deserters, drug smugglers, and, occasionally, murderers. One day I found myself back in the States beginning my first teaching job, and for a while I didn't know which world seemed more like a dream. But reality finally returned, and I'd been trying to put the C.I.D., and Harry, behind me ever since.

" . . . just like way back when. It's like riding a bicycle, prof, you know that."

I leaned back in my office chair and its springs creaked. The office felt even warmer and stuffier than before, the lattice-work of sunlight had moved another inch across the floor, and the computer screen still flickered with last year's notes. I watched a leaf float listlessly to the ground outside my window.

"Okay," I capitulated. "Just a meeting, Harry, just a conversation. No obligation, no investigating, just a little advice. The Shop. Twelve thirty. *Hamlet*. And Harry . . ."

"Anything you want, old boy."

"Don't call me again."

Winston Atwater was a man out of his milieu. Even without a description, I recognized him immediately. I let him flounder for a few moments as he entered the diner. The Shop is a dumpy hole-in-the-

wall in the commercial no-man's land between the university district and the city's freshly rehabbed North Side. I was sitting in a booth at the back near the kitchen door. It was a noisy spot, but it gave me a good view of the entrance. Atwater stepped timidly inside, stopped, and the door swung shut behind him, hitting him in the shoulder. Shrugging off the blow or the embarrassment, he looked over the crowded room. I watched his technique, such as it was, as he studied each face at each table, arousing the hostile interest of several diners. This was a man who knew how to maintain eye contact but had never learned how to avoid it.

He was overweight but he carried it well, and I suspected that others described him as "portly." His complexion was florid, and he wore the round horn-rimmed glasses currently popular with executives and attorneys. He was dressed in a dark blue suit with a red silk tie just wide enough to be complacently out of style, and he carried a very thin alligator attaché case.

His eyes finally met mine, but still he hesitated. I picked up the dogeared paperback copy of *Hamlet* from the table and stood it on end momentarily so that he could see the title. He exhaled visibly, made his way

to me through the closely arranged tables as if walking through a minefield, and settled gratefully into the booth.

"How do you do, Dr. Rhodes," he gasped. His forehead sparkled with perspiration.

"Noah will be fine, thanks," I answered. "But if you insist on formality, it's Mr. Rhodes. I'm not the kind of doctor who takes your blood pressure." The way he looked, I thought, that might not be a bad idea. "So, our mutual friend Harry tells me you have a problem. Fill me in."

Atwater's eyes bulged in his red face. His lips twitched as if he were trying to form words in an unfamiliar language. Finally the words burst forth.

"I've received a note, a threat, not a threat actually, but an implication. An intimidating implication, connecting me with a murder."

They always begin at the ending. "Who was murdered, Mr. Atwater?"

"Well, no one actually. I'm the president of Dichron Industries. My plant manager, Ed Reilly, was killed last night, but it was an accident. He fell from a scaffold while he was repairing a compressor at the plant."

"So have you been implicated in a murder or in an accident?" I knew the man was distraught,

but his confusion irritated me to sarcasm. I softened my tone. "Look, I know you're upset. Just tell me what the note said."

He leaned toward me across the Formica tabletop, his eyes darting from side to side. "My name was on the outside. Inside it said, 'I know you killed Reilly, and I'm going to call the police.' I found it under my office door when I got to work this morning."

"So it was some crank with a sick sense of humor pulling your chain." I was thinking about Harry. Why did he bother me with this nonsense, with this nervous little man? Maybe he was pulling my chain. "You said it was an accident, you've got nothing to fear. So what's the problem?"

Atwater rested his arms on the table, palms down as if bracing himself in a heavy sea. His cuff caught some sticky residue on the table and he jerked his arm up, wiping at the stain with the heel of his hand. He looked back at me and blinked, his train of thought momentarily lost.

"There was an argument. Yesterday afternoon. The whole plant saw it. Ed's always been a friend, a good friend, but I was furious with him. We got into a shouting match in his office. I knew everyone in the produc-

tion floor could hear it through the glass, that was bad enough. But he stormed out of his office and I followed him, still shouting. His office is up on the second level, overlooking the production area. I was yelling at him and suddenly I looked down at the floor, and everyone had stopped working. It was humiliating."

I sat silently for a moment, not so much to reflect as to give Atwater time to calm down. I spoke in a soothing tone. "What exactly did you say? What was the most incriminating thing you said to him?"

Atwater must have asked himself that question already because he responded quickly. "I said, 'If you don't back me up on this, you're through.'"

I raised my eyebrows involuntarily. "Nonetheless, he died in an accident. How did it happen?"

"It happened last night after everyone had gone home. Ed was working late, repairing a compressor that had been acting up all day. The switchbox that supplies power to the compressor is on an overhead, a steel catwalk running along the wall way above the production floor. Apparently he climbed up there to turn the power off. He touched the wrong wire, I guess. The compressor runs on a 440 volt line. He got

a shock and must have lost his balance and fallen. It's probably fifty feet down to the floor. The medical examiner who came to the plant said it looked like the fall killed him rather than the shock." Atwater settled back into his seat with a long exhalation, his hands resting lightly now on the edge of the table.

"So that's it?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you've left something out, haven't you? What was the argument about?"

"Oh. Yes." He paused, looked absently toward the front door and the street outside. "Dichron is fighting a takeover attempt. The three managers—Ed Reilly, Gene, the R&D Director, and myself—are at odds on how to respond. I'm flatly against it, this company is my life. Gene's in favor of it, thinks it would be good for the company and for us. Ed has been undecided. Yesterday afternoon he said he thought Gene might be right. I couldn't believe it. I felt personally betrayed, and I let him know it. That was the argument."

They always begin at the ending.

Leaving the commercial strip, I wandered down treelined North Side streets past garreted Victorian mansions and trendy

shops, drifting unconsciously toward the campus. Atwater had a problem all right, but I didn't know if he needed me or a prescription for tranquilizers. About all I could do for him was try to find out who had written the note. If Reilly's death was indeed an accident; he had nothing to fear in the way of either blackmail or extortion. Nothing, that is, except someone out there who didn't like him. And we all have a few of those in our lives. I was kicking myself for not sending him packing. But I hadn't. Something was nagging at me, an ungrounded suspicion that I couldn't shake. Whether Reilly's death was an accident or not, a corporate takeover play spelled trouble. The stakes are high and the players are ruthless. Corporate raiders, arbitrageurs, call them what you will, they're sleight of hand experts, playing a shell game for enormous stakes, and all you can count on is that everything is not as it seems.

From my campus office I phoned Jack Kilbourne, an investment counselor and old friend of mine, and asked him what he knew about Atwater's company.

"Hmmm. Dichron. Not too big a company. Electronics, control systems, some defense work. New York exchange.

Pretty active lately. Lots of takeover rumors, but I don't know if there's any substance to them. The company's solid enough but nothing special, nothing that would inspire a takeover. Rumor also has it that Randall Crown is the would-be buyer. But he's a hit-and-run man; even if he is buying stock, that wouldn't necessarily mean he's looking to take over the company."

"How about management? Would it be a hostile takeover?"

"Very interesting question. I have a feeling you already know the answer. Unusual management. The CEO is Winston Atwater, one of the wimpiest looking guys I've ever seen, but don't let him fool you. He's been in the business for thirty years, and he knows the ropes. But he's not the whole story. There's an operations manager named Ed Reilly, and a research and development director, Eugene Salzman. Ordinarily, they'd be subordinate to the CEO. But the Board of Directors listens to all three of them, pretty much equally. They've all been together since the vacuum tube days, and they bang their heads together and come up with the decisions. They call them the Triumvirate. As long as they're in accord, the board rubber stamps their recommendations. How am I doing?"

"Great, Jack, thanks. There's just one thing you should know about the Triumvirate. . . ."

Maggie met me at the door with fire in her eyes. "Noah, where have you been?" She wasn't waiting for an answer. "Some man has been calling every fifteen minutes. He's hysterical, says it's urgent that he talk to you right away." She stopped speaking and stared at me long and hard, a practiced expression that never failed to wither me. "He's no student and he doesn't sound like a professor. Noah, we talked about this." Another long pause. "You promised me. You could get into trouble, acting like some dime novel detective. Or you could get hurt." The worry in her voice turned to anger. "And the caller didn't have a tinplate British accent, but I'll bet Harry Simmons is mixed up in this somehow."

I shrugged and edged past her in the doorway. "Did he leave a number?"

"Where on earth have you been, Rhodes?"

Atwater was a basket case. "You've got to help me. They're saying it's murder. You've got to do something, Noah." From "Dr." to "Rhodes" to "Noah" in four hours; by tomorrow I'd be a close relation.

"Who's they?"

"What?"

"Winston, who are 'they' who are saying it's murder?" I was speaking calmly, hoping it would rub off.

"Oh. The detectives. The detectives came to the plant while we were at that horrible diner. One of them climbed up on the catwalk and examined the switchbox. He said it had been tampered with. He said there had been 'foul play.' I couldn't believe it, he actually said 'foul play,' like in some old movie."

"Winston, listen to me." I spoke to him as a child. "Calm down, take a few deep breaths. I'll see what I can find out. Did you get the detectives' names?"

"Yes. My secretary wrote them down for me." There was a pause as he shuffled through papers. "Here it is. Kozlowski and Williams. Sergeant Kozlowski and Detective Williams."

"That's good. I know Kozlowski. He's okay. Did they talk to you?"

"Yes. They asked me a lot of questions. Do you think they'd tell me if they suspected me?"

"Count on it." Right before they put the cuffs on, I thought. But Atwater was in no condition to hear hard truths right now. "Where were you last night?"

The pause on the other end was longer this time. "I was out, I was alone. I went to a movie

By myself. I had an argument with my wife."

"No one saw you, no one who could identify you?"

"No. No one. No one at all." No pause this time.

"Did the detectives ask you the same question?"

"Yes. I told them what I told you."

"Great, that's great, Winston." I sighed, then hoped he hadn't heard it.

After dinner and an unsuccessful effort at appeasing Maggie, I retreated to the study, dug up Leo Kozlowski's business card, and called him at his home number.

"Hello, Leo, it's Noah Rhodes. How have you been?"

"Who?" I waited for the shoe to drop. "Rhodes... oh yeah, I remember you. Listen, this had better be about enrolling me in night school or I'm gonna pull you in for operating without a license. I haven't forgotten the last time; you know."

Good old Leo. He wasn't really a bad guy, but he didn't appreciate interference from amateurs. A couple of years ago Harry Simmons had persuaded me to help out a woman who was suspected of killing her husband. At the same moment that Leo was booking the wife, I was meeting with the victim's business partner, the real killer. The meeting received quite a

bit of publicity, as the partner was shooting at me at the time, and Leo found it all rather embarrassing.

"I'm trying to reassure a friend, a real nervous type. I thought you might be able to help. Winston Atwater."

"Oh, brother." Leo's voice was half laughter, half annoyance. "He's the nervous type all right. He ought to be, considering."

He was going to make me draw it out of him. "What do you mean? Considering what?"

"I mean considering his plant manager couldn't fly and didn't bounce." Leo loved to talk tough. "Considering it wasn't an accident and the whole plant heard Atwater arguing with Reilly yesterday afternoon, and considering he topped it off with a death threat."

"Come on, Leo. He didn't threaten to kill him, he threatened to fire him. These guys are executives, they're under a lot of pressure. They probably argue like that all the time. How did it happen, anyway? I understand the wiring had been tampered with."

Leo didn't answer right away. He disliked being probed for information, but he loved playing the expert and he loved an opportunity to talk like Mike Hammer. Eventually his ego got the best of him. "Yeah. Very smooth. The perp switched the

wires on the power box. Three wires: hot black, hot white, green for ground. Only, the green wire should've been black and Reilly didn't know it. Dirt had been rubbed on the thumb nuts so they didn't look tampered with. And just for insurance, the killer smeared some grease on the catwalk to make it nice and slippery near the box. Reilly touched the hot wire thinking it was safe, and got a 440 volt zap. His fingers looked like french fries." Kozlowski paused to savor his metaphor. "Apparently the shock didn't kill him, but he lost his balance, slipped on the grease, and did a triple gainer onto the concrete floor fifty feet below. The M.E. established time of death as between nine P.M. and midnight."

Leo was enjoying himself now. I took a breath and went for the big one. "Winston went to a movie alone last night. I understand he wasn't getting along with his wife. He's afraid you don't believe him."

"Right. We talked to him. Three times he told us he was alone. Absolutely sure no one saw him. You know, I've seen plenty of jumpy suspects, and they grab at straws. There's always a ticket girl or a waitress or a bus driver who they at least hope might remember them. He had a spat with the little woman all right, we checked it

out, but the rest of that story's a ringer."

I wasn't about to argue the point. "Any other suspects? You must have heard there's a takeover attempt in the works; that ought to get lots of people nervous."

"Yeah, we know about it. I'm wondering how come you do. There's the third manager . . . these guys were a trio, you know . . . Eugene Salzman. He was there during the argument, but he wasn't really involved. Anyway, he doesn't have a motive; he's in favor of the buyout, and Reilly was coming around to his point of view when he was killed. The last thing he needed was Reilly dead."

"Did you check for an alibi, just in case?"

"Sure we did. He was at a party all evening. A 'black tie affair.'" Leo gave the words sarcastic emphasis.

"What about the other possibility?"

"What other possibility?" There was irritation in Leo's voice at my suggestion that he had missed something.

"The money man. The buyer in this takeover bid. Whoever he might be."

Leo growled. "If you find out, make sure you give me a call."

"You'll be the first to know," I said.

I slipped out the door and eased it shut behind me. Going out again, at eleven o'clock at night and without explanation, was not the way to get back in Maggie's good graces. But telling her where I was going would have been worse.

I stopped briefly at Atwater's house, then drove to Dichron Industries' headquarters and plant. The complex, a newly constructed office building attached to a refurbished old foundry, sat atop a low grassy rise at the end of a winding driveway. The moonlight revealed the office first, a long, angular structure made of the gray stony stuff that looks like granite block but is really smeared on like plaster over construction panels. Its broad, low configuration, beveled roofline, and smoked glass windows made it look like a gigantic version of one of its own computer chips. As I drew closer I could see the plant, a towering skeleton of steel I-beams and sheet metal, flat black, peak roofed, and hovering like a stormcloud behind the spiffy new offices.

I parked at the side of the building to avoid the attention of passing patrol cars and walked to the main entrance. I slid Atwater's employee I.D. card through the security terminal, and its magnetic strip electronically unlocked the door.

With the aid of a pocket flashlight, I threaded my way through dark hallways looking for the crossover to the plant building. Eventually I found the double doors Atwater had described to me, a sign on the left one reading PRODUCTION FACILITY and on the right WATCH YOUR STEP.

Through the doors, my flashlight beam dissipated into empty blackness. I stepped forward tentatively, heard my foot strike metal flooring, groped ahead until my hand felt a railing. Running my other hand along the wall behind me, I found a light switch and flicked it on. I was standing on a railed walkway, a sort of gallery running along two sides of the plant building perhaps twenty-five feet above the production floor. The plant floor spread out below me, one huge open space divided into work stations by head-height partitions. All along the wall behind me were glass-windowed offices with glass-windowed doors, where foremen and managers could work while observing their staffs on the floor below. The third door down bore a plaque that read EDWARD REILLY, OPERATIONS MANAGER. This must be where the unfortunate argument took place, I thought. I imagined Atwater's shouts echoing through the building, his round

red face, and his embarrassment as he realized what he was doing and looked down at the plant floor to see employees' astonished faces staring up at him.

I looked toward the roof, a vaulted framework of metal dotted with skylights. Along one side, where wall and roof met, was a gray steel catwalk with conduits, pipes, and cables running beside it. It was a good twenty feet higher than the walkway I was standing on. My eyes found the switchbox, big as a refrigerator, its door left open by the detectives. Inside it was a maze of heavy electrical wiring of different colors. I looked down from it to the concrete floor below and saw an area roped off by bright yellow plastic ribbon with "Police Line: Do Not Cross" printed repeatedly across it. In the center of the area was a smeary red stain. I shuddered and felt suddenly cold in the huge empty space. I flicked off the lights and stepped back through the double doors.

A few yards down the corridor, a red sign on a door caught my eye: RESTRICTED AREA: NO ADMITTANCE. Below the sign a brass plate read RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT: EUGENE SALZMAN. I tried Atwater's I.D. card in the door's security terminal, but it didn't work. An ordinary

credit card between the door and the frame was more successful. The latch clicked and the door slipped open.

Playing my flashlight around the room, I found mazes of equipment carefully arranged on lab tables. Along the back wall was an especially large assemblage of electronic devices, meters, wiring, and tubing, with a sign on the table saying DO NOT TOUCH! In the middle of the setup were two heavy stainless steel boxes, each about a foot square. One of them had tubing running out of it and over the side of the table, while the other was connected only to electrical wiring. The box with the tubes felt cold. I turned my light underneath the table and saw that the source of the tubing was a white steel tank labeled "Liquid Nitrogen." No wonder the box was cold.

I directed the light across the floor and into the corners, found the wastebasket, dumped its contents onto the floor, and quickly browsed through them. A sheet of crumpled paper caught my eye. I examined it, touched it, smelled it, put it in my pocket. I aimed my light at the telephone. It was a computerized model with an LCD display that printed out the number you were dialing.

On my way out of the build-

ing, I stopped at the office manager's computer terminal. I selected "Main Menu" and studied the screen. A box in the center listed five options: Word-processor, D-Base, Security Log, Calling Record, Employee Schedule. I selected "Calling Record," punched in responses to several inquiries, and waited as the screen flashed "Searching." In a few seconds a list of phone numbers was printed in columns beneath two-digit extension numbers. I pressed "Print." Next I selected "Security Log" from the Main Menu. I typed in yesterday's and today's dates and waited. The screen printed out names and times. I hit "Print" a second time, and tore off the copy.

I poured my coffee and shrugged off a chill, but Maggie's icy gaze would not release me. Yesterday's anger had congealed into this morning's silent resignation, and my seven A.M. call to Winston Atwater hadn't helped a bit. I told him we needed to meet first thing at his office, but he was reluctant. An emergency Board of Directors meeting had been called for tomorrow morning, and he was frantically preparing for it. I reminded him that he couldn't run Dichron from a prison cell, and he acquiesced.

I gulped down my coffee and escaped to my study. Randall Crown's secretary wouldn't give me the time of day, much less an appointment with her boss. I told her it was a confidential matter regarding Dichron Industries, and she put me on hold. She came back in about thirty seconds and told me Mr. Crown had had a cancellation and would fit me in at eleven thirty. I checked my watch, pulled on my overcoat and hurried out the door, attempting a casual "See you later, hon" on the way out. It didn't take. I had just enough time for a quick stop at the physics department on campus and a chat with Professor George Atkins, a friend and colleague of mine.

Atwater instructed his secretary to hold his calls and leaned back in his chair, hands folded across his stomach. "All right, Noah. You have my attention." He was a different person in his environment.

"Look, I've got to be straight with you, Winston. You're the prime suspect, and I need a few answers if I'm going to have a shot at helping you out. First of all, cut out the dancing on this alibi. You weren't straight with me, and you weren't straight with the police. And the police know it. Do you have an alibi or not?"

Silence hung in the room for moments. I listened to the air conditioning humming through the ventilator grate. Finally Atwater spoke, his voice faltering. "Yes. No. I mean yes, but I can't use it."

"Let me help. You had a fight with the wife, so you went to visit the girlfriend, right?" Atwater wore an expression like a small boy caught pulling the cat's tail.

"It's my wife. I can't let her find out. It may sound old fashioned to you, Noah, but she means the world to me. I've made mistakes and I've jeopardized my marriage, but I can't lose her. Especially now."

I thought of Maggie's smile, and realized I hadn't seen it in two days. "No," I answered, "it doesn't sound old fashioned to me at all." I was going to have to solve this one the hard way.

The intercom buzzed and we both started. "Excuse me, Mr. Atwater. Mr. Salzman is here with some papers that he says can't wait."

Atwater nervously straightened his tie. "Send him in, Miriam."

Eugene Salzman was tall and skeletal with high cheekbones and an arching nose. He wore a tie but no suit coat, and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. The pocket of his white shirt held a row of pens.

"Sorry to interrupt, Winston." He glanced at me and paused.

"Gene, this is Noah Rhodes, an old friend of mine from college. We're fraternity brothers. Noah's a professor at State." I was amazed at wimpy Atwater's facility at lying. I stood and shook hands with Salzman. He had a firm, easy handshake and a friendly smile.

"State University? What's your field, Mr. Rhodes? Or is it Dr. Rhodes?"

"English literature. My specialty is the metaphysical poets. You know, Donne, Wyatt, those boys." I always felt awkward about it. No one knew, or cared particularly, who the metaphysical poets were anyway. It sounded moldy and boring, and it seemed only I saw their poems as intricate puzzles daring me to solve them.

"Really. Yes." He turned to Atwater. "Well, Winston, these are the papers for the meeting tomorrow. Please look them over, make sure you approve." He looked at me and nodded. "Sorry again to interrupt. Nice meeting you, Dr. Rhodes." He ambled out of the office like a gangly schoolboy.

"He's really a decent fellow," Atwater said when the door had closed. "It's too bad we don't see eye to eye on the takeover. It's tearing this company apart, and

it hasn't even happened yet. Maybe I should just go along with it. But I can't, this company means too much to me." He seemed to be talking more to himself than to me. "Where were we?"

"You were just giving up the alibi that might keep you out of prison. Look, just a couple more questions and I'll be on my way. What are your communications with your prospective buyers?"

He looked mystified. "What do you mean?"

"I mean who from Dichron is negotiating with them?"

"Why, no one. There are no negotiations. This is a hostile takeover attempt, we're not even positive who's behind it. We assume it's Randall Crown, but we don't know for sure. And we're not interested in communicating with him, in any case. When he's ready, he'll contact us. Why do you ask?"

I ignored his question. "One more thing. Liquid nitrogen. What do you use it for?"

"I don't think we do. Not in any quantity, anyway, or I'd be aware of it. I really don't understand these questions, Noah."

I shrugged indifferently. "Just covering all the bases. Would you mind if I come to the board meeting tomorrow?"

He looked surprised. "It's rather irregular, but I don't

think anyone will mind. I don't see what good it will do, though."

"Like I said, just covering the bases." I headed toward the door.

"Say." I turned back to Atwater. "What were those papers Salzman brought in?" I saw resistance in his eyes. "Trust me. What are they?"

"All right, but this is corporate business, no one outside Dichron must know about it. It's a golden parachute."

"A golden parachute?" I hesitated. "Ah, a bailout arrangement for the executives, right? You're afraid you'll all lose your jobs in a buyout, so you write yourselves a contract; Dichron pays you the equivalent of the treasury of a small nation if you get axed. If you win you win, and if you lose you win, right?"

Atwater didn't like my explanation, but he nodded. "Yes, for the three managers and the board members. We have to protect ourselves."

"So why is Salzman giving it to you?"

"For me to check over and approve, make any adjustments that might be necessary."

"Yes, I know. What I mean is, why aren't you giving it to him to look over? You're the business manager, he's the scientist."

"Oh." Atwater nodded. "I see

what you mean. I don't want this buyout at all, golden parachute or no. Gene offered to draw it up, partly because the task would be distasteful to me and partly, I suppose, because he felt he could do a better job since his heart is in it. I'll approve the wording, but I'm not giving up my fight." I saw a determination in his eyes that I hadn't noticed before, and I remembered Jack's warning not to mistake this man for a wimp.

Randall Crown was a man who loved wealth for what it gave him, and loved power for itself. His secretary had directed me into his office, and as I sat waiting for him to enter, I looked over my surroundings. The room was as big as the first floor of my house, but sparsely furnished: a mahogany conference table and six chairs along one wall, a built-in bar along another, a grouping of low-backed armchairs around a glass cocktail table. The far wall was a panorama of floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a picture postcard view of the city. Centered in front of the windows was an enormous oval desk made of a tropical wood which I couldn't identify and topped with plate glass. It was covered with sheafs of papers, all meticulously ordered and symmet-

rically arranged. Glass shelves on the wall behind the bar displayed Crown's collections: blown-glass vases, pre-Columbian pottery, Renaissance salt cellars of silver and gold. Paintings hung on all the walls, but no photographs were visible anywhere, no family snapshots on his desk. My observations were interrupted by the sound of the door opening.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Rhodes. Sorry to keep you waiting." His tone of voice said he wasn't, and I hadn't identified myself as "doctor" to his secretary.

He was of average height and build, clean-shaven, and combed his hair, thinning at the temples, straight back. He wore a gray English suit and a gray silk tie. His features were ordinary except for a strong jaw and unnervingly intense dark eyes. He settled into his desk chair with a sigh, in the manner of a busy man who finds little opportunity for rest. He fixed his eyes on me and didn't speak for what seemed like a long time. He picked up a small glass paperweight from his desk and peered into it as if it were a crystal ball. He looked back at me.

"So, Dr. Rhodes, what could an English professor from State University possibly have to tell me about Dichron Industries?" I wasn't surprised that he had

taken the trouble to learn who I was.

"You've been on the telephone with Eugene Salzman several times in the past few days. I was wondering what you had discussed." There was no point in wasting time with preliminaries.

His gaze didn't waver. "Your information, wherever it may have come from, is in error, Dr. Rhodes." I noticed a trace of accent, unidentifiable but definitely there. "But even if it were accurate, why would I be disposed to discuss it with you? Perhaps you should explain your interest in the matter. You are a stockholder in Dichron?"

He knew perfectly well I wasn't. "No, I'm not. I'm sure you've heard about Ed Reilly's murder. No arrests have been made yet, but there are several suspects. The other two managers are among them."

He leaned toward me, his disinterested stare transforming to hostility. "So what, Dr. Rhodes? This is not of interest to me."

"But you may be of interest to the police. You might even be considered a suspect. This publicity about Dichron is bad enough, given the delicate stage of your dealings. Certainly you wouldn't want the spotlight focused on you personally."

He sat back in his chair again.

"So what would you suggest?"

"Just answer a few questions. Believe me, it could be beneficial to you; there may be variables in the Dichron buyout of which even you are not aware."

"All right. What do you want to know?" I was getting his interest.

"So you have been discussing the takeover with Salzman?"

"Yes. He's in favor of it. He has been assisting me in persuading the rest of the 'Triumvirate' and the Board of Directors to cooperate, and I have suggested that there will be a place for him in the company when I control it."

"And what place is that?" Crown glared at me, but answered.

"CEO. Head of the company." Half my mind was with Crown, formulating my next question, but the other half was trying to fit pieces together. That half was telling me something was wrong. But for now I had to concentrate on Crown.

"From R&D director to president of the company. That's an impressive promotion for a scientific man, a man without a business background. A bit too much reward for greasing some wheels with the board. I wonder why?" It was time to play my hole card. "A new development perhaps, an invention, a scientific advance."

Suddenly Crown was on his feet, leaning toward me, his knuckles braced on his desk, his face reddening. "Understand this, Rhodes." He spit his words through clenched teeth. "I am not a man you should fence with. If you try, I will run you through. I don't know why you're involved in this matter at all, but I suggest you get out while you still can." His voice was rising. "There is no new development, and your suggestion that there is is pure fantasy. You have been in your little literary world too long, Dr. Rhodes!"

The more he leaned toward me, the more I relaxed back into my chair. When he was done I waited a moment. I smiled. "To paraphrase a quote from my little literary world, 'you do protest too much,' Mr. Crown. I'm not making wild guesses. I've seen the evidence ... the equipment, the liquid nitrogen. It's thought-provoking: you, Salzman, and a new development that Dichron itself doesn't know about. I'd say we have fraud and conspiracy, and whatever the Securities and Exchange Commission boys come up with. They're really feeling their oats since they put Ivan Boesky away."

Crown deflated back into his chair. His face was ashen. He looked at me with his still-in-

tense eyes. "Salzman approached me, not the other way around. The buyout was his idea. He had the invention, and he wanted to be appropriately rewarded for it. He offered to railroad the buyout through the board if I'd make him president. Without the invention, the company is a turkey. With it, well, that's a different story. He wanted to be CEO, nothing less, and you know what the invention is worth. I couldn't turn him down."

Suddenly the piece that hadn't fit fell into place in my mind. "Quite a scheme, Mr. Crown. But there's a bit more to it than you realize. Tell me, are you free tomorrow morning?"

I stepped out into a late fall morning of bright sun, leafless trees, and my breath steaming in the air before me. I felt invigorated, but the feeling was marred by the thought that Maggie was still angry with me. What was worse, the very thing that made me feel so alive, my investigation into the Atwater affair, was the source of Maggie's anger. Life is never simple, I thought, and turned my attention to the day's work. After my meeting with Crown I had stopped at Atwater's office. Over his protestations, I had read through a copy of the golden parachute and

confirmed my suspicions. We had then enlisted Miriam's secretarial skills in preparation for today's meeting.

The chairman of the board, a very old man with silver hair and prunish features, rapped his gavel weakly. He was looking at Randall Crown and me, as was everyone else in the room. "Winston, I'm not sure how to conduct the meeting under these . . . circumstances."

Atwater stood. "Perhaps a word of explanation is in order. I've invited Dr. Rhodes because he may be able to help us out of our dilemma. I've also granted his request to bring along Mr. Crown, although we all realize it is a rather . . . unconventional procedure."

"Unconventional?" It was Salzman, his birdlike visage exaggerated by anger. "This isn't unconventional, it's unprecedented. It's outrageous! We cannot conduct a board meeting in the presence of the very individual whose takeover attempt is its subject. Winston, your judgment in allowing him here is irresponsible. Not to mention the fact that you're the prime suspect in Ed's murder."

Atwater rested his hands on the papers before him, a calmness coming over his face. "At the moment, I'm still the president of this company, Gene. You may change that if you all

see fit." He looked disdainfully at the faces at the table. "But first, we will conduct this meeting." His demeanor was utterly different in this one place where he felt supremely in control.

"So now I'll turn the meeting over to Dr. Rhodes. Following that, he and Mr. Crown will leave us to our privacy. Dr. Rhodes, you have the floor."

I stood and surveyed the field of skeptical faces: seven men and three women, in addition to Atwater and Salzman. Atwater was to my left at the foot of the table, and Crown was at my right. Salzman, across from us, was peering suspiciously at Crown, who was looking at no one in particular. The chairman of the board was at the head of the table. I picked up a copy from the stack of stapled papers before me and cleared my throat, but I was interrupted before I could speak.

"Excuse me, Dr. Rhodes," croaked the old chairman. "May I ask what you are a doctor of?" He sounded more like an eccentric old man than a chairman of the board.

"English literature, Mr. Chairman." I smiled as the room gasped in unison. "But I can assure you that I will not let it affect my judgment... if you will promise the same for your judgment of me." A few restrained laughs could be heard.

"I'm aware that the directors and the three managers of this company have been at loggerheads over how to respond to a takeover attempt. I'm not here to offer an opinion on the advisability of such a buyout, but rather to forge a compromise that will be agreeable to all.

"My proposal is as follows. First, Mr. Crown has agreed to buy your stock at a price of forty-five dollars a share." Positive "hmm's" ran through the room. Salzman looked warily at Atwater, then Crown, then me.

I picked up the pile of papers and circulated copies down the table. "Second, I've developed a golden parachute plan acceptable to Mr. Atwater. If you approve it, he will recommend that you cooperate with Mr. Crown's purchase offer." Atwater nodded in assent. "It is, essentially, the plan prepared by Mr. Salzman." Salzman's eyes were fixed on the stack of copies moving toward him along the table. "My revision simply increases the bonuses to the officers and the board—I think you'll be pleased at the figures—and makes a few minor non-monetary changes." Salzman grabbed wildly for a copy. Throughout the rest of the room, smiles were popping up like spring flowers as the boardmembers read their proposed bonuses.

Salzman was riffing frantically through his copy while the rest of the board silently awaited his reaction. He stopped and read one passage intently. He leaned closer and reread it. Finally he looked up, the color drained from his face, his lips tight. He looked more birdlike than ever.

"Winston, you cheat!" He stood up and his chair nearly toppled over behind him. He was trembling visibly. "And you . . ." he turned toward me. "Who are you, anyway? What are you doing here?" Back toward Atwater. "Never! I will not accept this agreement!" He threw his copy onto the table. The rest of the room was staring at him in amazement.

The old chairman rose reluctantly to his office. "Gene, I don't understand. This is a very good offer. Very good indeed. What, exactly, is your objection? It is your own plan, isn't it?"

Salzman was attempting to compose himself. He breathed deeply, blinked and looked around. "No, this is not my plan. It's been changed. The R&D rights. They've been taken away from me." Crown, who had been sitting impassively throughout, sat up straighter in his seat, his burning eyes riveted on Salzman.

"Ah," said Winston, as if on

cue. "What Gene is referring to," he spoke patronizingly to the board, "is Paragraph 16, Subheading 'c.' A very minor item, really. Gene had specified that the rights for any new technical developments, anything not previously patented by Dichron, would revert to him if he left the company or was terminated." Crown leaned forward on the table, listening intently, his eyes frozen on Salzman. Atwater continued. "It's a perfectly understandable error; he is the R&D director, and those are his creations, so to speak." Now he looked at Gene. "But, of course, the company always retains the rights to employees' inventions; it's the only way it's done." He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. "I simply corrected a standard clause."

The chairman spoke. "Gene, Winston's correct. It's perfectly routine, you mustn't take it personally. And what is there to lose? As of your last R&D report there wasn't anything earthshaking in the works." He looked slightly embarrassed. "I don't mean that critically, of course," he added.

I stood and looked toward Salzman. "Perhaps you do need to explain, Mr. Salzman." He was sitting perfectly still, looking off toward the far wall at nothing in particular. "You

could explain to us about the experiment that's set up in your laboratory, the one with the liquid nitrogen." He turned toward me slowly, looking at me with tired eyes.

"Mr. Salzman did have something earthshaking in the works," I went on. "So earthshaking, in fact, that he chose not to share it with the board or anyone else at Dichron. Liquid nitrogen is used, among other things, for cooling electronic circuits to extremely low temperatures. As you ladies and gentlemen know, there are certain substances which, when very cold, conduct electricity with extraordinary efficiency. I'm told by a physicist friend, a colleague of mine, that they're called 'supercooled superconductors.' Eugene developed a practical application of these superconductors which can be used at room temperatures in ordinary electronic devices, computers, and such." The members of the board sat open-mouthed. "I see from your expressions that you appreciate the significance: he found the Holy Grail of electronics, the invention that will revolutionize the microchip industry." Salzman's expression was vacant now, dreamy-eyed and distant.

"He knew his discovery was priceless, and he knew he

wouldn't be fairly rewarded for it. There was a clause in his employment contract with Dichron... perfectly routine..." I nodded to the chairman, "providing that any of his developments would become the company's property. Fame he would certainly get, but fortune... no reward that Dichron could give him would be enough."

I turned to Randall Crown. "So he approached Mr. Crown with an offer; he would help him take over the company in return for its leadership."

Salzman seemed to be waking slowly, like a child. He spoke in a quiet voice. "That's absurd. Dichron would have given me the presidency in a minute for a development like that."

"Yes," I said, "it would have. But you had no interest in being president of Dichron. You persuaded Randall Crown to take over the company while, unknown to him, you drafted a golden parachute agreement that would give you the invention as soon as he did. You didn't think Winston would notice the clause because he didn't want anything to do with the agreement anyway, and the rest of the board was only interested in their own compensation, not in a quiescent R&D department. And as for Crown," I

turned to him, but his cauterizing gaze was fixed on Salzman, his hands grasping the edge of the table as if to restrain himself from attacking. "The value of the superconductor is so great that it clouded even Randall Crown's judgment. All he could think of was owning it. He didn't realize that you would never settle for such a paltry reward as the presidency of Dichron. With ownership of the patent, you could have started ten Dichrons."

"This is nonsense." Salzman was fully awake. "It's all your fabrication, and Atwater brought you in. Right after he killed Ed Reilly."

"But he didn't kill Reilly, did he, Eugene? You of all people ought to know that."

He stood up abruptly and leaned toward me across the table. "Are you saying I did?" he snarled.

"Not at all. You had plenty of witnesses for your whereabouts that night. No, you never set foot in the plant till you arrived at work the next morning. What time was that, Eugene?"

"Around six thirty. I come to work early, everyone knows that."

"And so you did on Tuesday. You were the first one in the building. You went into the plant area for something . . . a tool, a part, it doesn't really

matter. And you found Ed Reilly's body where he had fallen — accidentally — while working at the switchbox. You saw your hopes to sway the Triumvirate in favor of the buy-out dashed along with Ed's life, and you were desperate.

"So you made a silk purse out of a sow's ear. You reversed the wires at the switchbox to make the shock look arranged, smudged some dirt over the nuts to simulate a coverup, and spread a little grease on the catwalk. I found the paper that you used to wipe your hands with in your laboratory wastebasket; it had heavy machine grease on it, but there's no heavy machinery in your lab. You just worked as usual in your lab until the plant workers arrived and 'discovered' the body."

A silence had fallen over the room. The board members were staring down at the table or resting their heads in their hands. Crown glared at Salzman, who was again staring absently at the ceiling. Atwater looked more relaxed than he had since I'd met him. The old chairman was smiling broadly, looking around at everyone as if this were the best time he'd had in a decade.

I broke the silence. "Tell me one thing, Eugene." He turned a weary face toward me. "Why the note, why to Atwater? If

you'd sent it to the police, it might have helped frame him. But you couldn't have expected him to reveal it."

Salzman smiled sadly and shook his head. "I couldn't chance sending it to the police; for all I knew, he had an alibi. The best I could do was make it look like a murder and hope the argument with Ed would be enough to implicate him. I knew it was thin. So I wrote the note to panic him. I hoped I could scare him into resigning or even running away. I've known Winston for years, and he's a tiger in the boardroom but a child everywhere else. I knew I couldn't compete with him here," he looked around at the wainscoted walls, "but in the outside world I had a chance. All I needed was an edge, and the edge was his own panic." Salzman laughed. "And it would have worked. Except for one thing."

I raised my eyebrows questioningly. "What was that, Eugene?"

"He found you first."

I sat in the kitchen sipping my coffee. It was no longer fall outside, and a white wintry sun glistened over frost on the lawn. Maggie was putting the breakfast dishes away.

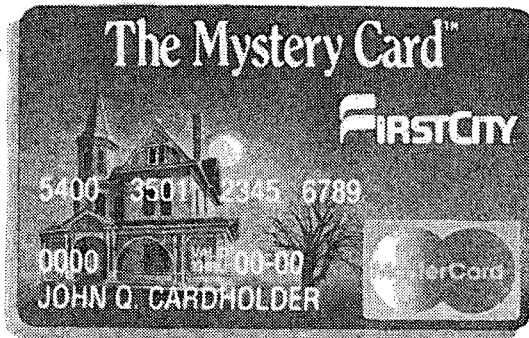
Reflecting on the past few days, I was quietly satisfied. Atwater was back in the saddle at Dichron, and Dichron was soon to be the biggest game in town. Randall Crown, of course, had withdrawn his takeover bid. An indictment was expected, said the papers, but I supposed he'd rather go to jail than get suckered on a deal. Eugene Salzman was out on bail, thinking about what might have been. He had his fame, but fortune still eluded him. I hadn't heard from Harry, and that was well and good. I suppose.

Maggie banged a pan against the faucet. "What are you doing there, hon?" I asked.

"Just banging pots and pans together," she said. I looked up and Maggie smiled.

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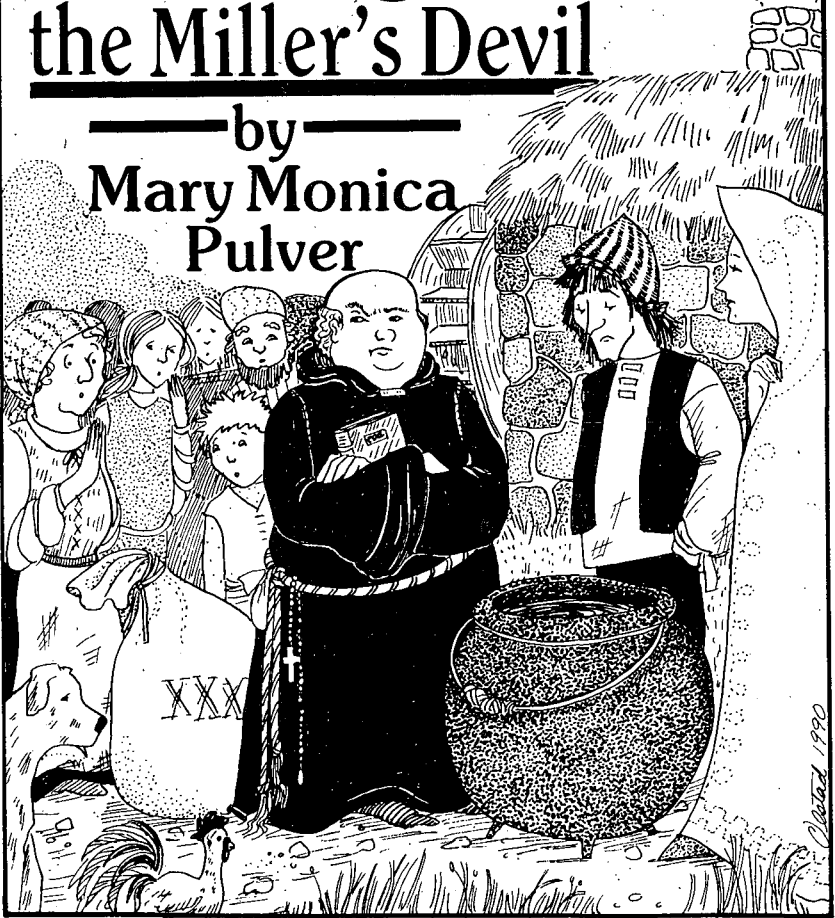
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Father Hugh and the Miller's Devil

—by—
**Mary Monica
 Pulver**



There is nothing quite so effective as a toothache for turning small tediums into soul-trying aggravations. Our daily chapter meeting, which ever moves at a snail's pace, seemed this day to resemble in its movement the sun along its path. Yet it was more than begun when Father Hugh came panting in, late as usual. He is a small fellow, and the hem of his black habit dragged on

Illustration by Patricia Olstad

the stone floor behind him. Worse, there was egg on his eyebrow and bread crumbs down his front.

He bowed to me as abbess, then hastened to his little stool on my right hand, barely seeing in time the slender book waiting for him before he sat on it. "Hr-hmmm," he said in his light tenor, put one sandaled foot on top of the other, and smiled around the room.

"Good morning, Father Hugh," I said coldly.

"Good morning, my lady," replied my priest, nodding at me as if my greeting had been as warm as his. "It is a great pity I am so fond of curried eggs for breakfast because the cook can't get the right of them so I have to assist her; and I am therefore late."

I said, "Perhaps you could find it in your heart to like curried eggs for *dinner*, or *supper*, and not keep us *all* tardy while you help our cook to prepare them."

Which was a lie; Father Hugh had doubtless heard us talking as he came, and knew that we had followed our usual practice when he was late and not waited upon his arrival. But he did not say so; instead, he drew up his shoulders and said meekly to his lap, "You are right, Domina; I apologize."

"Still," I said, "since you are here at last, perhaps you could read to us from the Holy Rule."

He opened the book and spent a paternoster searching for the correct page before he noticed the slip of ribbon marking it. Several of my ladies covered their mouths with the sleeves of their habits.

"Hr-hmmm!" he said repressively. "The reading for July 23, from the Holy Rule of St. Benedict." And he set off in his quick, fluent Latin. And then he must needs translate, for in this degenerate fifteenth century, nuns have become illiterate: I, with my mere smattering of Latin, am considered a learned rarity.

"He who does not come to table before Grace, so that all may say it together and sit down to table at the same time, must be corrected once or twice if this be through negligence or fault," he began, then lowered the book to add a commentary. "Grace is a common prayer, as much as any of the offices you pray. In coming late, you interrupt the others, which is rude; and since God hears and answers prayers, you interfere in a dialogue with One whose indignation you should most scrupulously avoid."

Excellent though his remarks were, I cleared my throat to stop him because my tooth pained me and I wanted Chapter over as quickly as possible. Besides, since we found our new cook none of us is ever late for meals.

He obediently shifted back to his reading, and my ladies, who

had heard this segment in March and would again in November—the Rule is so brief we hear it in full three times a year—tried to look edified.

He then offered a prayer for guidance from the Holy Spirit (which was sorely needed) and said, “Do continue with your meeting.”

“Thank you, Father. Where were we?” I asked.

“I believe,” said Sister Mildred, our sturdy Cellarer, “that we were discussing Robin Rudd, our village miller.”

“Which,” said Sister Harley in her most autocratic voice, “was a digression from our discussion of the penny loaf our customal says we must give the villeins when they cut our hay.”

“But an important digression,” said Sister Mildred firmly. “It’s very well to say ‘a penny loaf’ when the penny buys forever what it bought when that customal was written. But the loaf that costs a penny today could be bought three for a penny in my grandmother’s day. Our customal is far older than that. Besides, it’s unfair to offer a loaf full of sand and pebbles.”

“Sister Mildred is correct.” Father Hugh made a hasty little sitting-down bow in my direction. “You can yourself testify to the quality of Robin’s bread, my lady abbess,” he said. “Did you not injure your mouth on a pebble hidden in a loaf yestereve?”

“An isolated incident,” I retorted, wondering how he knew so soon the details of it. “There has never been a stone in abbey bread before.”

“That is because our miller knows better than to cheat the nuns who hired him,” replied Father Hugh. “But Deerfield villeins have complained for months that they take clean grain to the miller and receive back flour weighted with white sand and pebbles.” Father Hugh is always conversant with Deerfield opinion, which is not proper: as abbey priest he ought to be above the affairs of our bondsmen. Deerfield Village has its own priest to serve them.

I looked at Sister Mildred. She stood—she is tall, with a proud stomach and a chin not to be trifled with, excellent qualities in a cellarer, who must deal with worldly matters on a daily basis. “Villeins complain about everything,” she said. “According to them, the harvest geese last year were too small, we weren’t generous enough with the Christmas feast, and the desmane pease field hadn’t dried properly before they were called to plow it this spring. I am not surprised they complain the miller is a thief; they complain about everything. Besides, *all* millers are considered thieves.”

It is true that a tale featuring an honest miller would be a novelty. But her speech was marred by her defensive tone and the

mantle of red that covered her face. And I, her mistress, was suffering from toothache caused by a pebble in the bread.

Father Hugh said, "Our villeins are at the mercy of the miller. So long as we insist they use the abbey mill, and so long as bread remains their chief sustenance, they will suspect the miller of cheating them. And so long as we do not investigate the villeins' complaints, the miller may feel he has permission to cheat."

"Are you saying our miller is a thief?" I asked.

"I think not!" said Sister Mildred, who had hired him.

"I think he is," said Father Hugh—but he often took the villeins' part.

I said, "Father Hugh, since you have become an expert on grist-mills, go and prove our miller a thief, if you can. And you, Sister Mildred, since hiring and firing is your responsibility, do what must be done to put things to rights in our village."

"Yes, my lady!" said Father Hugh, jumping eagerly to his feet. He barely sketched a bow before hurrying for the door. "Come along, Sister Mildred!"

The first report of their activities came that afternoon, and not from him—or Sister Mildred, who later explained she had been caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment—but from girls setting flax to ret in shallow troughs of water in our outer courtyard. Long soaking makes the stems slough off their tough outer layer, revealing the strands of linen within.

Their leader, a competent villager named Meg, was saying, "No, no, Annie; the stems must be all under water, else the sun turns the linen fibers green, which is a sore task to scrub out. Do you want our nuns to go about in green wimples and be mistaken for ladies of the town?"

This passed for wit and was greeted with laughter. "I near mistook Father Hugh for a cook a while ago," noted Annie.

"Oh, aye," said a companion. "I saw him, too, carrying a big kettle into the village."

"Ee, w' all the servants about this place, you'd think madam could assign one or two to help the little fellow."

Eavesdroppers never hear good about themselves, but I will say in my own defense that I have on three separate occasions assigned a servant to Father Hugh, and had to remove each from his post before he became utterly spoiled by idleness. What my priest wants done, he does himself; he is incurably common.

I went to the kitchen where I was told Father Hugh had indeed

taken the biggest kettle, promising to return it by nightfall. Further investigation showed he had also borrowed a fresh sack of flour from a villen who lived near the abbey gate.

I wished to see what he was about, and stop him if necessary before he brought embarrassment on the abbey. But I did not want him to know I was concerned about his actions. Perhaps, I thought, I could say I came to see for myself if the church in Deerfield truly needs the new roof the abbey is being petitioned to buy.

I was saved from falling into error and falsehood (the Holy Rule forbids us to leave the cloister save on honest business) by Sister Mildred, who came to fetch me and Sister Agnes, our precentor and sacrist, with instructions that she should bring her music and Father Hugh's book of ritual. I was to bring my crozier.

"What's happened?" I asked. "Has someone died?" It would have to be someone important or I would not have been sent for.

"No, no, everyone is fine. Well, mostly fine. Father Hugh is going to perform an exorcism."

I felt both eyebrows lift. "What's this?"

"Father Hugh says a devil has taken up residence in the mill."

My knees grew weak, and I reached for a stool. I sank onto it, and Sister Agnes patted my hand anxiously while I closed my eyes and prayed for strength.

"Sister Mildred, the mill is not possessed of a devil," I said when I had found my voice.

"Yes, I know. Isn't he clever?"

"Who, the miller?"

"No, Father Hugh, of course. Robin is a fool, for all his hot temper. Now, please, we must go. I've ordered John Freemantle to saddle your ambling gray. Here's your crozier."

My crozier is particularly fine, of walnut and gold plate. The artisan who made it thought it was for a bishop and jointed it so it would break down for travel. I had never found that convenient before, as it was used only within the abbey precincts. But Sister Mildred showed me how it unscrewed in the middle of its stem, and put the two parts in a linen bag and gave it to John Freemantle to carry—John is our steward and a good, intelligent fellow.

Deerfield is a mile from the abbey. It has the typical broad street lined with fewer than twenty houses, small but mostly snug. The church is at the far end, and the sound of its bell is hardly prettier than the groan and plash of the gristmill's great wheel down by Deer River.

Father Hugh was in the road, standing between the large pot

and the sack of flour, his expression serious. He did not offer his usual cheerful greeting but gave a grim little bow. I noticed half the village people gathered near and drew breath to ask why they were not about their work.

But Father Hugh forestalled me with a sharp glance. "*Fidelia omnia mandata ejus: confirmata in saeculum saeculi*," he intoned, which after a moment I recognized as a line from Psalm 110: "The works of His hands are true justice, true faithfulness all His commands."

By which I understood he wanted me to know he had good reason for whatever he was up to. I countered with a paraphrase of Psalm 111: "*Beatus vir qui timet Domina*," remembering too late that it's *Dominam* when in the accusative. But I could see by his countenance that he understood the warning: Blest is the man who fears the Lady. Meaning me, *Domina* also being the title of an abbess. But his nod of comprehension came with a firm smile. My threat would not frighten him into giving up his plan.

Father Hugh turned to look among the villeins for someone. Not finding him, he called, "Send for Robin Rudd!"

Toby Sankin, our burly blacksmith, broke away from the others and went at a lope toward the river. He came back shortly with the miller. Robin was nearly as large as Toby, with fiery red hair and a broad beard that reached nearly to his waist.

Father Hugh said, "Come here, Robin, and tell me whose hand closed this sack of flour."

Robin came and fingered the stitching. "It looks to be my own," he said sullenly. "What of it?"

"Did you put sand in this sack of flour?"

"I never put sand in any of my flour," declared the miller. There was a growl of disagreement from the onlookers. He pulled loose the stitching and shoved a big hand into the sack. "Feel for yourself," he said. "There's no sand in here."

"We never can feel it with our hands," shouted a woman. "But we find it with our teeth sure enough." There was angry laughter in agreement.

"We shall see," said Father Hugh. "This flour has been accused; now it must stand trial. Let us take as our text, 'Cast your bread upon the waters.'" He picked up the sack, not without difficulty, and began spilling it into the pot of water. Some sank, some floated in clumps on top. There was a little murmur from his audience at this waste of food.

Father Hugh's light voice could become piercing when he

strained it against his throat and chest as he did now. "See and believe, o ye sinner! Put your hand to the bottom of my kettle, Robin."

"Whyfor?" asked Robin, with another show of aggression.

"To tell me what is in there," replied Father Hugh.

Robin grinned and rolled up the brown sleeve of his tunic. He made a show of plashing around in the pot. "There's naught in here but wet flour," he reported.

"And what is the bottom of the pot like?" asked Father Hugh.

Robin, who was not a bright man, frowned and groped deeper. His face changed. "Why," he cried, "there's sand! I can feel it with my hand!" His arm came out, fingers and thumb working. "What trickery is this?"

"No trickery," said Father Hugh loudly, speaking to the others. "There was sand all the while in the sack. Mixed with flour, it cannot be felt. But it is heavier than flour, it will settle faster than flour through the water, and gather in quantity great enough to be felt. I think you have convicted yourself of cheating your neighbors by putting sand into their flour and so giving false measure."

"Yea, yea!" shouted some of the villagers.

"Nay!" cried Robin, sweating now and so pale the freckles on his face stood out like raisins. "I am an honest man. I never put into any sack but what comes off my stone. I tell 'ee all, I've no idea where this sand came from, or any other sand, or pebbles yon folk complain to me about."

Now one may tell by his tone of voice if a man may be lying or is absolutely telling the truth, and it seemed to me there was an honest note in our miller's voice. Certainly he appeared honestly frightened. The crowd broke into a loud argument, for while the flour had convicted Robin Rudd, yet, as one put it, "Ee ain't good enow at shammin' to put on that face."

Father Hugh still looked grim, and I called to John to help me down off my mare, for I would not stand by and see an honest man put out of his livelihood. But even as my feet came safely to the ground I heard Father Hugh say to Robin, lifting his voice over the angry shouting of the villagers, "I believe you are telling the truth," and the shouting died away.

"In fact," said Father Hugh, "it seems to me there may be a more terrible explanation than dishonesty here. I think," and here he dropped his voice so that all had to lean forward and pay particular attention to hear him, "I think there is a devil come to live in the mill."

Such was the conviction in his voice that even I crossed myself.

"Burn it, burn it!" shouted a villain.

"No," replied Father Hugh sharply, cutting off the words before they could become a chant. "I have at hand the instruments that will rid the mill of its demon. John Freemantle, come and help me prepare to do battle with the forces of evil."

I turned to Sister Mildred. "I thought you said he told you there was not—"

"Hush, my lady; all in good time," interrupted Sister Mildred, which surprised me, as despite her high stomach she is normally respectful of my position, particularly in public. Then I realized she was anxious about eavesdroppers, and I held my tongue. She handed me my crozier, and we went to the mill to wait for Father Hugh.

The Deerfield mill was typical of its kind, perhaps a little smaller. The wheel that turned in the millrace was nearly as tall as the roof, and its wooden axle groaned loudly.

Standing a little away from the door of the mill was Robin's wife Isabel, dark as he was red. She wore her good green gown with an air that said she never dreamed she'd end up married to a miller. Her son Tom, well grown for fourteen but with a dull, vacant look about him, stood with her. He was as dark as his mother and dressed like his father in coarse brown stuff. The white marks of the miller's trade were on them as they had been on Robin—and his look of fear as well.

Isabel was gripping the shoulder of her son as if for support. Under her fright I sensed something else. Anger? Surely she didn't think it lowbred of her husband to be troubled with a devil, not when the Duchess of Bedford herself was caught dabbling in the black arts, trying to enmesh our unfortunate King Henry VI.

I would have gone forward to speak with her, but Sister Mildred drew my attention to Father Hugh, approaching with an entourage of altar boys, Robin Rudd, Father William, John Freemantle, and a dribble of curious villagers—some of whom slipped away when they saw me waiting, for I give short shrift to idlers. I hoped someone trustworthy had been left to guard the giant kettle, for it would strain our budget to replace it.

Father Hugh nudged Robin Rudd, who broke away to join his family, and John Freemantle, who knelt at my feet. John appeared to be smiling, though he kept his head down. (He is that sort of honest man you can read even from behind.)

Meanwhile Father Hugh had gone to stand in front of the open

door of the mill. He was wearing his second best alb and his good purple stole, the one with gold fringe.

"It appears Sister Mildred was wrong; Father Hugh believes after all there is a devil in our mill," I said.

"No, no, m'lady," said John. "We looked into things very carefully. There is a sand pit three miles from here with that very same sort of sand, though Robin didn't seem aware of that, nor was there any sand in his shoes or anywhere inside the mill or the house."

"And Isabel Rudd has such trouble with her feet that walking even to church is a trial for her, and has been since she was barely more than a child," added Sister Mildred, who would not be denied a share of this story.

"And the boy is too simple to think this up by himself," I concluded. "Do you believe it is a devil?"

"No, m'lady." John did look up then, and he was smiling.

"Has the miller an apprentice?" I asked.

"Only his son, who did have sand in his shoes."

"Stand up, John, and explain things clearly, or I shall think you insubordinate."

"Yes, m'lady." John straightened. He is above average height but not particularly comely. His hair is the color of dead grass, his mouth is too wide and thin, and when he smiles it goes crookedly. And his hands are too big and toughened by work. But his blue eyes are kind, his mind is quick, and his heart generous.

But I digress.

"The miller is innocent," said John. "The trick was being done by Isabel and Tom together. Wandering along the river of a Sunday last summer, he found the sand pit and told his mother it looked as if the river were making flour and spilling it along its banks. And she found that the sand mixed invisibly with the flour, even in considerable quantities.

"She had Tom bring home a sackful—he is often seen about the village with a sack over one shoulder, so this brought no questions—and they hid it under the mill, there being some loose stones around back."

Sister Mildred said, "Isabel found the loose foundation stones when she went hunting for pebbles to put in the earlier flour sacks. Just a few pebbles in every sack, to make it heavier, and soon enough she would have an extra sack of flour to sell or trade or use for her family." Sister Mildred snorted, an expressive sound.

"How does this bring us to the exorcism?"

"Well, you know how hard labor is to come by in these times,"

said Sister Mildred. "The plague in its time carried off so many that we are sore pressed even now to regain our former number."

"We were without a miller for nearly a year before Robin came," John reminded me.

"And we would rather have a dishonest miller's wife than no miller at all?" I demanded.

"She won't dare be dishonest now that we know who did the trick the first time," said Sister Mildred.

"But if the villagers find she and the boy have been cheating them, they will either drive them out or conclude they have a wicked abbess who protects the dishonest at their expense," said John.

"And which is it to be?" I asked coldly.

Sister Mildred said happily, "Neither. We will let the villagers believe there was a devil in the mill, infesting the flour with rocks and sand."

"Father Hugh has spoken with the woman—" said John.

Sister Mildred interrupted, "And you know what he is like when he smells wickedness." I nodded, for Father Hugh was, for all his other faults, effective with sinners who came under his eye.

John continued, "He told her that he knew how the trick was done. But while he was prepared to assist her this one time for the sake of her husband and the villagers, who after all must have their bread, he was not prepared to protect her a second time. If the problem recurs even after an exorcism, everybody will learn it is a wicked person in the mill, not the devil again."

I nodded. "That is most clear and satisfactory."

"But it isn't all." Sister Mildred leaned forward, eyes alight with amusement. "He told her that as she has been explaining the money she has obtained from the sale of the stolen flour by saying she has received a series of small gifts from her uncle, who is—" Sister Mildred tossed her head in imitation of proud Isabel—"the bishop's sister's brother-in-law, perhaps she should behave as the lady she would have us believe she is and share in charity her good fortune with her neighbors." Sister Mildred giggled, a rare sound.

"Father Hugh is very clever," John said. "But it might be wise, my lady, to begin now to search for a new miller. Wicked people rarely reform."

"I think she is not truly wicked," said Sister Mildred. "I heard no bad report of the Rudds from their master at Redford, which they left only because the lord was tearing down the village to make a deer run."

John said, "Perhaps Redford has no white sand pit to tempt her into sin."

But I said, "Perhaps an evil spirit can exist in the form of wicked notions. If that's the case, this exorcism may be needed after all."

"*In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen,*" came a light, clear tenor from the mill, and we turned, crossing ourselves, to face it. Father Hugh had begun the ceremony. He continued by invoking Michael the Archangel, "illustrious prince of the heavenly hosts." He was looking exalted already; for all his gentle mien, Father Hugh belongs to the Church Militant. "Lay hold of the dragon, the ancient serpent," he prayed in a loud voice, "and cast him bound into the abyss, so that he may no longer seduce mankind." A militant prayer indeed; even those without Latin were swayed by Father Hugh's fervor. The Rudd family crossed themselves again, Robin with a visibly trembling hand.

Father Hugh went into the mill alone, casting holy water from his silver sprinkler as if he were a figure in a fountain. "We cast thee out, every unclean spirit, every devilish power, every assault of the infernal adversary . . ." he said in Latin, his voice becoming louder. "Presume never again, thou cunning serpent, to deceive the human race, nor to strike the chosen of God and sift them as wheat!"

My mind, stumbling behind in translation, paused to wonder at the aptness of that last phrase.

His voice grew even stronger, and so terrible that even the most formidable demon must surely quail and flee before it; so it was almost a surprise to see a diminutive figure appear in the doorway, wispy hair damp and clinging, a gentle smile on its face. "*Dominus vobiscum,*" he said.

"*Et cum spiritu tuo,*" we all replied reflexively, the exchange familiar from the Mass: The Lord be with you—And with thy spirit. The ritual was ended.

But the Lord remain with Isabel Rudd, I thought; for the eyes of my priest and steward most certainly would follow her, and she would not be so mercifully dealt with again.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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This is a coverup. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION



Silent Warning

by William J. Carroll, Jr.

Thirty or so miles north and east of Rapid City, a rather dilapidated sign loomed out over a stand of pine that edged the side of the road. It read SKI WHITE WOLF!—NEXT LEFT, and although I didn't ski, I did start watching for the turn.

It came about a mile farther on, just short of a concrete span which straddled a dark, fast-moving river that looked heavy with spring runoff. Another sign, the little brother of the first one and in little better shape, marked the egress, but I pulled over and stopped for a minute to check my location on a road map and to stretch my legs.

I'd been on the road for two hours, and I was feeling my age in my shoulders and lower back, which was where I always felt it. I was tired, stiff—and a little more worried now than I had been earlier.

I stood for a while outside my rental, smoking and watching the river, which flowed southwest out of a range of blue smudge hills that peaked in the distance over the top of a skeletal forest to the north, and I tried to rid myself of the anxiety that had grown up in the pit of my stomach.

But it didn't work.

I was looking for someone—someone missing—and the dark, gloomy wildness of the

countryside in which I was searching had begun to give me dark, gloomy, wild thoughts.

I got back into my car and, just as I did so, a noisy pickup truck rumbled up onto the highway from the road to White Wolf.

There were two men inside, and they gave me a pair of suspicious looks as the truck fish-tailed onto the road and sped off. There was a rifle rack in the cab, and on the rear bumper was a sticker that read AMERICA—LOVE IT OR DIE!

It did not quell my anxiety.

The road to White Wolf was a slender ribbon of blacktop that wound itself through some heavy forest skirting the river, then turned steeply up the side of a hill. It switchbacked so sharply at some points that I barely inched along.

Eventually the road straightened and led me down into a large oval-shaped valley, across a rattling steel bridge, and abruptly into the outskirts of a small town that sprawled along the river's edge and up across the face of a mountain.

White Wolf, South Dakota.

Under six inches of new white snow, on a clear day and with the sun bright and brilliant in the sky, it was a town that at one time might have been post-

card material. It might have looked picturesque, perhaps inviting, and maybe even friendly. Maybe.

As it was, however—naked, under the shadows cast by low-hanging clouds that obscured most of the mountain, and even darker skies above—it looked like a wet, shiny fungus that had grown up out of the dirty river and was spreading like ringworm throughout the valley.

It looked gritty, but without an excuse, and I was glad to be only passing through.

But then I was always only passing through.

The town's public buildings were clumped down along the river, and I found the White Wolf police station with no trouble at all.

It was a large stone building, just off the muddy town square, with several blue and white squad cars in front. I parked next to them, braving a variety of threatening signs that forbade my doing just that, but it had been a long drive from Ellsworth Air Force Base, and a longer flight from Fort Lewis before that, and I was feeling impatiently reckless.

I climbed out of my car and heard some children laughing excitedly.

Next door to the police station was a school, and in the closed

alley between the buildings a group of young boys were throwing stones at a small mangy-looking dog, which they'd trapped at one end.

I watched as the dog scampered left and right, farther and farther back into the alley, avoiding the thrown rocks pretty easily at first, but then the children began to close on the animal, and I could see it tiring.

Sensing its own doom, the dog finally stopped backing up and, braving a storm of rocks, charged down one side of the alley and out onto the street, where it was pursued out of sight by the children, who howled their disappointment.

After the boys were out of sight themselves, I stood there for a minute more letting the tension ooze out of my shoulders. More dark, gloomy thoughts crossed my mind.

White Wolf, South Dakota.

It was no place to be lost in.

It was 1500 hours exactly when I entered the large outer office of the police station. A few men in uniform looked up at me from the rear of the room, then away with studied uninterest. I told a clerk at a desk near the door who I was, and she sighed wearily, told me to wait, then disappeared for a moment.

When she returned, she had

a large man in tow who frowned at me over her shoulder.

"You're Warrant Officer Virginiak?" he asked.

I told him I was, and he beckoned me into an inner office.

On the door to the office was a sign that read MAXWELL R. FOWLER—CHIEF OF POLICE.

"I've been expecting you," he told me in a rather resigned way as he waved me to a chair in front of his desk. "You work for this Colonel Chavez, right?"

"Yes, sir."

Fowler seated himself behind his desk and glared at me. He was a big man—six four or five—with a shaven, bullet-shaped head and a face marked by a large hooked nose and a pair of thick, black, and very mobile eyebrows. He looked about fifty, was thirty or forty pounds overweight, and in a bad mood. "So," he said tightly, "what can I do for the army today?"

I smiled at him. "We still have a man missing, chief . . ."

"You know," he said sharply, "I'm starting to get kind of irritated at you folks."

I nodded. Chavez had warned me that the man had sounded angry on the telephone, and he was.

Fowler pointed a finger at me. "I resent the implication that we haven't been doing our job here."

"I haven't implied anything, Chief Fowler."

"Then what are *you* doing here?" he asked quickly.

I sighed. "One of our people is missing . . ."

"I know that, Mr. Virginiak, but that doesn't answer the question, does it?"

"I suppose not." I sat back in my chair and lit a cigarette. "Look, Chief Fowler, I know—and Colonel Chavez knows—that you've done everything you could, given the limitations we placed on you. This is a funny business." I shrugged. "I think we've been just hoping he'd turn up. We didn't want to call Gilliam missing until the last possible minute."

Fowler made a face, as if to say that he'd heard all this before—which he had.

"But," I went on, "the last possible minute came and went." I shrugged again. "Now—we're concerned."

Fowler snorted. "If your Colonel Chavez was so damned concerned about this man, he just might have been a bit more cooperative."

"How so?"

"Like a description of the man, to begin with." He made a sound of disgust. "How can I even start looking for him unless I know what he looks like, for crying out loud?"

I nodded. "I understand."

He looked at me expectantly for a moment, then said, "Well,

I don't understand, Mr. Virginiak. I really don't."

"It's a funny business," I told him again.

He shook his head.

"In our line of work," I explained, "descriptions of personnel are classified." I shrugged. "Maybe it's silly, maybe it's not—but that's how it is. In any case, no one is accusing you of not doing your job."

He sighed. "Well," he said, "can you tell me what the man was doing here, at least?"

"Sure," I said. "Lieutenant Gilliam was conducting a background security check on a Military Academy applicant by the name of Falk. Roger Falk."

Fowler's thick eyebrows joined suddenly.

"The boy lived here," I went on, "for a year or so, back in '87, which was when his parents were divorced. He went to live in Oregon with his mother; that's where he is now. His father, Lee Falk, is a retired sergeant major who lives here in White Wolf..."

"I know the man," Fowler cut in. "And I knew the boy, too."

I nodded. "Good..."

"Lee Falk," he told me, in a softly warning tone, "won the Congressional Medal of Honor."

"I know."

"He's a good man."

"I imagine he is."

He leaned forward over his

desk and frowned at me. "What kind of check are you doing on him?"

I smiled. "It's routine," I told him. "All West Point applicants who are being considered for appointment are subject to a preliminary background investigation. Lieutenant Gilliam was conducting it."

Fowler frowned at his desk top. "And he disappeared."

"That's right."

He thought about that for a moment, then looked up at me. "Maybe he went AWOL."

"That's not likely."

He frowned a bit more and sat back. "Okay," he told me. "So, what do you want me to do?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "Gilliam was seen after arriving at Ellsworth Air Force Base last Sunday night. I just came from there. He rented a 1989 blue Ford Thunderbird, and wrote on the invoice his destination as being White Wolf. After that, I don't know. I assume he drove straight here, which is when he should have checked in, but he didn't, as you know."

"This is Friday," Fowler complained. "Trail's gonna be real cold by now." He shook his head. "Your colonel didn't call me until yesterday."

I nodded and shrugged. "We didn't think there was reason to be concerned, until yesterday."

Fowler sighed. "Well..."

"How many hotels in town?" I asked.

"Just one," he told me, thoughtfully.

"Only one?"

He nodded. "The other ski lodges close up after the season," he explained. "Only the Good Haven stays open year round." He shook his head. "But I already checked with them. After your colonel called. No one by the name of Gilliam—or anyone else for that matter—has checked into the Good Haven for more than a week."

"You told Colonel Chávez that there've been no reported accidents in the vicinity."

He chewed his lower lip, nodding vaguely, then asked: "Would he have been in uniform like you are?"

"Yes."

He worried his lip a second more, then shook his head. "I don't think he ever came here."

I nodded. "Well," I told him, "I have to go on the assumption that he did." I stood up. "I'll start with Sergeant-Major Falk, if you could give me directions to his house."

"He has a ranch, outside of town. Him and his nephew." He seemed to be considering something. "Tell you what, Mr. Virginian," he said, getting to his feet, "I'll give you a ride out there myself, if you'd care to wait for a few minutes."

"I'd appreciate it," I told him.

He had me wait in the outer office where I killed the time looking over wanted posters tacked inside a glass case on the wall. Murder, armed robbery, and rape were common themes. The men depicted in the posters also seemed to share a common look—a vacant yet sullen stare—as if, by it, they were issuing a sort of silent warning.

I caught a glimpse of my own face reflected in the glass, and it had somehow taken on something of the same look. It took a conscious effort to remove it.

After about ten minutes or so, Fowler came out of his office and led the way to his marked van, next to which I had parked.

There was a ticket on my windshield.

Once inside the car I asked him: "Is he home?"

"Sure is," Fowler told me, giving me a brief look. "Said to come on out."

"Did he say anything else?"

Fowler laughed shortly. "He did mention that he hadn't seen your lieutenant friend, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I meant," I replied.

Fowler drove us quickly north, through a rather rundown, jilted-looking section of the town, then deeper into the valley along a

rather narrow road that clung to the edge of the moving water.

"Falk's place is clear out the other end," he told me. "Don't get out there much, myself."

"Really."

He took this as a question and said, "I've known the Falk family all my life. Went to school with Lee. Him *and* his brother. I knew Lee's father, too."

"You know him well, then? Sergeant Falk, that is."

"To tell you the truth, not that well. Lee ran off to the army way back when, you know. Right after high school. Joined up right in the middle of Vietnam."

"I know."

He looked at me, then nodded. "Oh, sure," he said. "Well, anyway, he went off to the army, and as far as I know, he didn't come back until after his pa died. That was in '86 or so." He paused as the road began to switchback along the mountain. When it straightened out finally, we were beyond the valley and into a terrain of rolling, grass-covered hills. "I've only seen him a couple of times since then," he said.

"I see."

He looked at me. "We weren't really close friends or anything, and after he came back—well, I guess we didn't have too much in common, y'know. I guess people just change," he added.

Sometimes they do.

After another ten minutes of driving, Fowler turned down a deeply rutted dirt road that led into a narrow canyon, where he had to slow down considerably. After a few more miles the road spilled out onto a broad plain at the other end. There were cattle on either side of the road in rather large numbers, and men on horseback were worrying them.

"This all used to be Falk land," Fowler told me, waving a hand at the world outside the windshield. "This whole valley. Old Man Falk was as big a rancher as they get up this way." We made another turn, winding down into a heavily wooded glen. "But that's all done with."

"What happened?"

He sighed. "Well, after the old man died, he left the place to Lee, but Lee wasn't much of a rancher."

"I see."

"Him and his brother—" he looked over at me "—that would be Clement, they worked it for a while, but then..." He shrugged. "They had a lot of hard luck."

We passed through the section of trees, passed a collapsed wooden fence, and turned into a gate. There was an old sign on the ground leaning against the gate that read FALK RANCH.

"We're here," Fowler announced, pointing ahead.

At the base of a small tree-covered hill, I saw a rather homely one story ranchhouse that seemed to be leaning to one side. There was a burnt-out barn to the left of the house with an old Ford pickup in front and a dilapidated corral on the right in which an old brown mare was pretending to be confined.

"What sort of hard luck did they have?" I asked.

Fowler slowed the car as we moved down through a dirty looking stream that fronted the ranch house like a poor man's moat. "Well," he told me a bit uneasily, "Lee's wife—I think her name was Mary? Anyway, she took off with the boy, which you know. And then Clement died—that was about a year ago." He shrugged. "And now Lee's just sellin' off the land. Not workin' it at all."

We drove up out of the stream and into the waist-high weeds that choked the front yard, where Fowler parked. "Never thought he'd do that, you know. I mean, sellin' off the land." He shook his head. "I expect that's why the old man left it all to Lee in the first place, and not Clement. The old man must be turnin' in his grave."

There was no one in sight, and for a moment we stayed sitting in the car.

"Right after Lee came back," Fowler continued, "I came out,

just to say hello. But he didn't have too much to say." He seemed to still be a bit puzzled by it, and a bit resentful as well.

"People change," I reminded him.

He grinned at me without much humor. "That they do," he said, opening his door. "That they do."

We got out of the van, and started toward the house, but as we did so, someone cursed loudly over to our left, and out from under the pickup truck in front of the barn a figure stood up in a small cloud of dust.

"Hello, Homer," Fowler said. "Long time no see."

A young sour-faced man wearing blue coveralls and a significant amount of dirt and grease and slapping dust from his clothes stared at us slack-jawed.

"Your Uncle Lee around, Homer?" Fowler asked.

Homer's face soured a little more. Scowled at me.

"This is Mr. Virginiak," Fowler explained.

I nodded and smiled at him, but neither gesture provoked much pleasure from him.

Homer was a small man who wore his dark, dirty hair long and knotted behind his neck. He looked around twenty or so but was still battling acne in what appeared to be a losing fight,

and his peeled back upper lip as he looked me over showed a line of small, rather green teeth. I guessed he had a hard time making dates.

"He's inside," he said. "Said you was comin'."

"Don't see much of you around town, these days, Homer."

Homer shrugged.

"Hope you're stayin' out of trouble."

Homer smirked.

Fowler slapped the hood of the pickup. "You be sure you get this wreck in shape before you put it on the road, Homer."

"I'm workin' on it," said Homer resentfully.

"You do that, boy," Fowler told him in a hard, official voice. "You do that."

The young man gave the White Wolf chief of police that look I'd seen on the faces in the wanted posters, then ducked back underneath the truck.

Fowler snorted, gave me a grin and a shrug, and was about to say something to me when the screen door to the house banged open and a man wearing blue-jéans and a black Stetson pulled low over his forehead appeared on the porch. "That you, Max?"

"Howdy, Lee," Fowler replied, as we walked to the porch. "How've you been?"

I watched as the two men shook hands.

Sergeant-Major Lee Falk,

United States Army (retired), was a small man himself, though taller than his nephew and with a good show of knobby, hard-looking muscle over his upper body and arms. He sported a wild growth of white-black beard, and his eyes, even in the shadow of the hat brim, looked almost as wild as they flicked toward me.

Fowler nodded in my direction. "This is the man I told you about, Lee, Mr. Virginiak."

Falk nodded and removed his hat, revealing a head of matted dark hair that was partially obscured by a wide red-checked bandanna he wore wrapped around his forehead. "Pleased to meet ya," he told me and started to hold out a hand for me to shake, but I came to attention and saluted instead.

This seemed to surprise him, and he returned my salute with a vague, hesitant gesture. "Well..." he said a bit self-consciously; then he spotted Homer, who had crawled out from under the truck again and was gaping at us. "That's my nephew, Homer," he told me.

"We've met," I said.

"Lee..." Fowler began.

"Let's talk inside," Falk interrupted. "I got coffee on."

We followed him inside the house, into a large, cluttered, and somewhat dirty living room, where Falk indicated a rela-

tively clutter-free divan for us to sit on. "Sorry 'bout the mess," he told us, rather unapologetically. "No woman round the place to clean up after us, if you know what I mean."

I told him I did, though I didn't, and sat on the musty smelling couch. Fowler said nothing, and stayed standing by a large smudged window that framed the weed garden in the front of the house.

"Coffee's fresh and hot," Falk said.

I went for it, but the chief declined.

After Falk had brought me a cup from the kitchen, he seated himself on the edge of a low coffee table piled with dirty breakfast dishes and looked at Fowler. "Ain't seen you in quite a spell, Max."

Fowler shrugged. "You know how it is, Lee."

Falk nodded.

"Heard you sold off Willow Valley," the police chief said sadly.

The sergeant-major nodded again. "Got a good price for it," he replied. "Weren't doin' me any good just holdin' onto it."

Fowler looked away, out the dirty window. "Still . . ."

Falk snorted. "I know, I know," he said quickly. He glanced at me. "Folks around these parts have this sentimental attachment to land like it was blood

kin, or something." He snorted again, then smiled at Fowler. "It just ain't profitable for us small-timers any more, Max. Hasn't been for years."

Falk turned to me again. "My pa thought that way, too," he said, "but he was just plain wrong."

I nodded.

Falk sighed and sipped at his own coffee, then said to me: "So, what can I do for ya? What's this about some lieutenant?"

"Lieutenant Gilliam," I told him. "He worked in my section," I explained. "We're CIC. He was conducting a background investigation on your son Roger."

Falk's eyes squinted at me. "Roger? What's he done?"

"He's applied to West Point."

His squint eased, but he still looked a bit puzzled. "Oh," he said.

"You didn't know?"

"No," he replied. "My son and I . . . Well, we haven't been very close the past few years. Since his mother took off with him, you know." He sighed. "I wish him well, though."

"Well," I said, "as I was saying, Lieutenant Gilliam was assigned to conduct a background check on your son, and he seems to have disappeared."

Falk frowned at me, then at Fowler. "Oh yeah?"

I asked: "You haven't been in contact with him, have you?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Can't say as I have."

"Nor with anyone else," I went on, "in the past few days, who might have inquired about your son?"

"Nobody."

I nodded toward the door. "How about your nephew?"

"I don't think so," he told me. "Let's find out."

Back out on the porch, Falk hollered to his nephew, who reluctantly left his work and came up to us. "Hom," Falk said to him, "you talked to anybody the past coupla days? This here man's lookin' for a frienda his. A lieutenant, name of Gillian."

"Gilliam," I corrected.

Falk smiled. "Yeah. Gilliam."

Homer shook his head. "Nope."

"No one at all?" I said.

Homer snapped an angry look at me. "I said no."

"No need to be rude, boy," Falk said warningly.

Homer's mouth twisted into a smirk. "Is that all?" he asked his uncle.

Falk glared down at his nephew for a second, then waved a hand at him, and watched him turn back toward the pickup truck. "That boy," he said quietly, "is a real handful."

A peal of thunder, not too distant, cracked and echoed through the hills, and then a gusty set of breezes began whipping about the yard.

"Looks like a real banshee is cookin' up," Falk said, stepping out into the weeds. He looked back at me and said, "Sorry I couldn't help ya."

"No problem, sergeant-major," I told him, then to Fowler I said, "I guess that's it."

I shook hands with Falk, then Fowler and I got back into his truck. Fowler gave Falk a wave, and Homer, who had turned to watch us go, a nod. As he put the car in gear and started off, Fowler said, "That boy will come to no good."

"Oh?"

"Just a hunch."

I glanced out the back window and saw Falk standing on the porch looking up in the sky for his banshee. I couldn't see Homer. I said, "Has he been in any trouble before?"

"Some," Fowler said. "Back when he was in high school. But he's got a mean streak in him just like his pa."

"That would be Sergeant Falk's brother?"

"Yeah."

"You mentioned he was dead."

He nodded. "Last year. Took a fall from a horse up in the high plains." He pointed vaguely back over his shoulder. "Broke a leg. Died."

"Died of a broken leg?"

"His horse run off, and he couldn't get back down." He

shrugged in a leisurely way. "Wolves got to him."

I stared at the policeman for a moment, then said, "You don't miss him, do you?"

Fowler laughed. "No," he told me, shaking his head. "I don't miss him a'tall."

It seemed as though an explanation would be forthcoming, but it didn't happen. I was tired of talk then, anyway, so I didn't press.

We drove on in silence.

I didn't know where my next move in looking for Gilliam would be, and my mind, since talking with Falk at least, seemed to have shifted into neutral. If I couldn't get a lead on him, the FBI would have to be called in, which was something both Chavez and I would prefer to avoid but I had no ideas at all. At least, not very coherent ones. The fact of the matter was, I was starting to have uncomfortably morbid thoughts.

In fact, when we were back on the valley road, just as several sharp rolls of thunder rattled the world, I had a sudden image of Gilliam lying dead in a ditch with a bullet in his back.

Which didn't mean a thing, of course, except perhaps that I was tired and hungry, and not a little frustrated.

The sky overhead was darkening and lively with storm

clouds as we got close to town. We made the outskirts just as the rain started to fall. By the time we pulled up to the police station again it was pouring.

"So, what next?" Fowler asked me as he parked the van next to my car.

"I don't know," I told him. "I'll call in to my CO and see what he wants done. In the meantime I'll need a place to stay."

"That'll be the Good Haven," he said, and he gave me directions.

When we got out of the car, he spotted, then grabbed, the now soggy parking ticket from my windshield and said, pointing to the plainly visible NO PARKING sign on the sidewalk, "Don't you believe in signs, Mr. Virginiak?"

"Sure I do," I replied.

"Well?" he demanded, shaking the ticket at me in mock anger.

I shrugged. "I just don't worship them, that's all."

I found the Good Haven Inn, with no trouble.

It was a large, rambling building, cantilevered out on stone pillars in the mountainside above the town. Mammoth trees stood guard all around it, and two large red brick chimneys running up the walls at either end chugged black smoke into the black sky.

I parked my car in the mostly empty parking lot, got out my B-4 bag, and doubletimed in the rain up the flagstone steps to the front door, over which was a sign that read: WE RESERVE THE RIGHT TO REFUSE SERVICE TO ANYONE! Remembering my last words to Fowler, I stepped through feeling a bit nervy.

Just inside the door I was met by a floor-mounted menu that seemed to favor beef dishes. The menu guarded a well-lit but mostly empty dining room that opened to the right, and faced a darkened bar from which some country-western music was escaping to the left. Straight ahead was a wide stairwell, and beside the stairwell, behind a curved counter, was a large woman, heavily made up and leering down into the pages of *The National Enquirer*. She batted her eyelashes at me as I approached. "Table for one?" she asked.

"Probably," I told her. "I'd also like a room, if you have a vacancy."

She laughed soundlessly and turned out a registration book. "Always a vacancy here," she said, then added with practiced regret, "This time a year, we're always mostly empty. We do a good business, though, come the snow. You ski?"

"No, I don't."

"Me neither," she said, smiling. "I'm just too . . . uncoordi-

nated or something. I just fall flat on my fanny when I try." She patted her rump in case I didn't know where her fanny was, and winked. "You know what I mean?"

"I think so."

She smiled dreamily, and said, "I'm Bess Dykstra, your innkeeper, by the way."

We shook hands and then I signed the register.

"Thirty-six fifty a night," she told me, after turning the register around to read my name. "Mr. . . ."

"Virginiak."

"Virginiak," she echoed. "That's not Irish."

"No, it isn't."

She smiled, then leaned forward over the counter, resting her large bosom over her folded arms so that it blossomed up through the top of her blouse. "Sounds like somebody who's crazy for virgins." Her tongue darted to the corner of her mouth. "Is that what you are?"

I laughed, and pointed to the sign on the wall behind her. "Just how selective are you?"

"Call me Bess," she said in a whispery voice, as if she'd found some double meaning in what I'd said.

"Do you refuse service often, Bess?"

She blinked, turned to look where I was pointing, laughed. "Oh, no!" she said, and shook

her head. "That was my ex's idea. He was an idiot."

"How about last Sunday night?"

"Huh?"

"I'm looking for a friend of mine. It's possible that he might have been in White Wolf last Sunday night, and I was wondering if you might have seen him?"

One of her painted eyebrows arched. "Chief Fowler . . ." she said.

"Yes."

She nodded. "He came by the other day to check the register for some guy . . ." She frowned slightly, cracking the patina of makeup over her forehead.

"Lieutenant Robert Gilliam. United States Army," I said.

"That's it!" she told me, then shrugged. "But he never checked in." She moved the register back around to face me. "Look for yourself."

"What I'm asking, Bess, is it possible that he might have been refused service here? Were you full up, Sunday night?"

"We haven't been full up since March."

"I see."

"We're so strapped right now, that Jerry wouldn't have refused service to Bigfoot if he came through that door."

"Who's Jerry?"

"My son," she told me, with

curious reluctance. "He works the desk here weekends."

"Is he around?"

She rolled her eyes. "No way! He tends bar till four, weekdays, and then he's gone. God forbid he should stick around to help out after four."

I picked up my bags.

"Can you find the room by yourself, honey?" she asked sweetly, dangling the room key close to her bosom.

I took the key from her hand and smiled.

"Room 22, just down the hall to the right at the top of the stairs," she said to my back. "Dinner till nine," she added hopefully.

I found my room, a large one choked with overstuffed furniture and with a window view of the valley. I showered, changed into civvies, and, after placing a call to my office back at Fort Lewis to let them know where I was, decided I was hungry.

The dining room by the time I got back downstairs held a good crowd, which, I assumed, was the mainstay of the inn's business during the off-season, and I had a good, if expensive, meal and half a bottle of a too dry Californian that made me drowsy.

I was in bed before ten, but despite the wine, sleep didn't come easily. A feeling that I'd

forgotten something nagged at the corner of my mind.

A little after eleven I heard a soft, tentative knocking at what could have been some other door but was probably mine. I was afraid it was Bess, so I stayed still as death and the knock was not repeated.

After that I fell asleep, and dreamed about being stoned by laughing children who were slowly, but inexorably, turning into wolves.

A soft purring sound woke me at 0300, and it took me a moment to find the phone in the dark, strange surroundings.

It was Chavez, sounding impatient. "They found Gilliam."

"Gilliam?" I said. My mouth felt rubbery. "Where?"

"He's dead."

I stared at the glowing numbers on the face of my clock.

"Virginiak?"

I turned on a light to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

"Virginiak?"

"I'm here," I said, rubbing my face. "Did you say he's dead?"

"Some sort of accident," said Chavez irritably. "Are you anywhere near Beaumont?"

I thought about that.

"Virginiak?"

"I don't know. Hold on." I pulled out my roadmap, studied it for a moment, then said, "Yes,

I am. It's about twenty miles or so north of White Wolf." I put the map away. "Is that where he is?"

"Yeah. The South Dakota state police just called the staff duty officer here. Gilliam put his car into a river somewhere." He sighed. "He's been in the water for a few days, they said."

"Oh, damn."

"Damn is right," he told me, then sighed again. "Hell, I hardly knew the kid."

"Neither did I."

"Yeah. Well . . ."

"You want me to go to Beaumont, sir?"

"Yes. He'll have some material with him we'll want back. They haven't pulled the car out yet, so I'm told."

"All right."

"And, you could identify the body?"

"All right."

"Um . . . It's at the morgue which is located in something called the Beaumont County Criminal Justice Center."

"I'll find it."

"Right," he said.

And then—for just a second or two—when we should have had something to say in the way of mourning the loss of a man we worked with, we said nothing.

We hadn't really known him, so there was nothing to say—and we were both a little ashamed of that.

"Well," Chavez said finally in a rough-edged voice, "I'm going back to sleep."

"All right, sir."

"Um . . . call me, if something comes up," he added.

"Yes, sir."

"Right," he said, and then he hung up.

And for a while then, I stayed in bed, watching my travel alarm tick time on the dresser, and I tried to remember Gilliam.

But I was tired, and he was dead, and it didn't matter anyway.

I got up the next morning feeling rather irritable, and I took it out on my face while shaving. For some reason, the idea that Gilliam was dead because of some stupid traffic accident angered me more than the notion I'd had the day before of Gilliam lying sprawled in a ditch somewhere with a bullet in his back. Something about the meaninglessness of it all rubbed me the wrong way, and I nicked myself a couple of times on the chin and neck, talking to myself about it.

But then, my mood was more likely the result of an underlying self-reproach.

Lieutenant Gilliam had been the new man in the section. New in all respects, in fact. Newly commissioned and fresh out of the Field Intelligence Training

School at Fort Huachuca, he had reeked of green enthusiasm—which meant, of course, that I, being the crusty old pro that I was, avoided him.

My SOP with new people on the job. Standing off. Keeping my distance. Letting them sink or swim on their own. And then—*only* then—if they showed some promise of ability and of lasting, would I stoop to help.

A tried and proven practice. Even Chavez did it.

And that was because, we would say to ourselves, we weren't in the business of winning friends. Our business was lonely stuff. Cold work—and only those who could work alone and in the cold were worth the effort of getting to know better.

And Gilliam had yet to prove himself.

And I was now remembering Gilliam, a friendly, willing, self-effacing young man whom I had not said ten words to in the six weeks he'd worked in my office.

A tried and proven practice.

How did I ever get to be such a jerk?

After getting dressed, I tried to decide whether to check out of the inn then or later. As I was fussing over that monumental problem, Fowler called.

He told me that he'd heard about Gilliam and offered to drive me to Beaumont.

I accepted the offer, and he said he was on his way.

On my way out the door I spotted a dark-haired young man behind the front desk whose eyes moved over me with a curious suspicion.

I nodded to him but got nothing back.

Good morning, White Wolf.

Outside, the rain had more or less quit, but there was a wet spring chill in the air that hunched my shoulders, and by the time Fowler pulled up and I got in, I was shivering.

"You cold?" he asked, knocking the heater up a notch.

"A bit."

"Helluva thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

Fowler moved us down the mountain road and onto the highway out of town. "We got the word this morning on the state police teletype." He glanced at me. "I'm sorry about this."

I nodded. "So's he."

We drove in silence until we came to the highway. Fowler turned left and headed north, where the countryside was less heavily wooded.

"Was Gilliam a friend of yours?" Fowler asked in a tentative way.

I sighed. "I hardly knew him," I admitted. "He'd just started with us."

"Was he married?"

"No," I replied. "He was quite young."

"Too bad."

"Yes it is."

After about a fifteen minute drive, which took us into a higher country, we crossed a bridge and turned west along a road which edged a section of the river that churned heavily and very rapidly. A bit farther on, the road turned up sharply, then down abruptly, and we came to a narrow hairpin bordered on one side by a steep, pine-shrouded hill and on the other by a hundred foot deadfall to the dark water below.

A pickup truck with police markings was parked on the shoulder, and two state policemen were standing by a flattened guard rail at the edge of the cliff, taking measurements.

Fowler pulled up beside the two men and asked for Captain Blaney.

"He's downriver," one of the men said, pointing farther west. "Where they pulled him out."

Fowler looked over the edge. "This where he went in?"

The state policeman nodded. "Sure is," he replied, then pointed to the road behind us. "Some skidmarks back there. Looks like he come over the hill too fast and just lost control."

Fowler nodded, then turned to me. "Want to take a look?"

I told him no, and he turned

back to the state policeman. "How far downriver are they?"

"'Bout a half mile or so," he told Fowler. "River runs real strong all along here, y'know." He stared down at the muddy, boiling water. "Musta been a helluva ride."

Just beyond where Gilliam's car had taken its plunge, the road leveled, and ahead on the left, we could see state police vehicles and a crane down at the river's edge.

A few boats were circling in the water.

The crumpled remains of a 1989 blue Ford Thunderbird were at that moment being dragged, front end first, out of the river.

Fowler parked next to a truck, and a grayhaired man wearing a black poncho got out of it and walked over to us as we got out.

"Blaney," Fowler said, "this is Warrant Officer Virginiak."

The man nodded and stared at me. His face wore the practiced mask of a man who found himself at the scene of accidents quite often. It gave nothing away. No sympathy. No reproach.

I suspected it had nothing to give.

"We got told that only you gets the stuff in the car," he said to me.

I nodded back to him, then at the car in the river. "How did you find him?" I asked.

"Road patrol found the guard-rail down yesterday afternoon," Blaney explained. "We planned to have a look-see today, but then some kids—" he pointed to a spot on the river about a hundred meters from shore where some rocks broke the surface of the brown torrent "—they was out in a dinghy last night, and they come across the car. It was hung up in them boulders." He turned his blank-faced look back at me. "Kids pulled the body out themselves."

I nodded, and watched as Gilliam's car was pulled onto the shore, dragging a lot of mud and debris with it.

Blaney led us down to the river's edge just as one of his men opened one of the doors, spilling a lot of river out of the car in the process.

The car was in very bad shape.

"River runs real strong around here," Blaney said. "Musta pushed this thing around like a toy."

I looked in the front seat, which was a sea of oozing black mud. There was a leather lettercase on the floor, and I retrieved it.

Blaney's men dug through the rest of the car's interior but found nothing more. They popped the trunk with some difficulty and salvaged Gilliam's suitcase. We drained the briefcase and Gilliam's bag of water, cleaned

them, and put them in Fowler's truck.

As we started to leave, Blaney came up to me and asked, rather apologetically: "You people will see to it that the next of kin gets notified, right?"

"We will."

"Thanks." And for just an instant the mask slipped, and his face showed weary relief.

A little before ten we arrived at the Beaumont County Criminal Justice Center, a new building situated in the center of Beaumont, which was a larger, cleaner looking town than White Wolf, about twenty miles west of the scene of Gilliam's accident.

The morgue, to which we were directed, was in a basement section of the building, and after we went through a door marked EXAMINATION ROOM: AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY at the foot of the stairs, I found Lieutenant Robert Gilliam, Counter-Intelligence Corps, United States Army.

He was lying face up on a shiny stainless steel table, opened from sternum to groin.

Fowler murmured something as we came into the room, and a man in a bloodied white smock who was poking at Gilliam's corpse looked up and said, "Can I help you?"

I held out my identification

and stepped forward, looking down into the bloated face of the dead man.

"Is that him?" Fowler asked behind me. "Is *that* Gilliam?"

I nodded. "That's Gilliam," I said.

But only in a way.

Only in the way that lifeless flesh, naked bone, and bared brain could be said to be anyone.

"I'm Dr. Henke," the man in the smock said. "Did you know this man?"

"We worked together," I told him.

He put aside the bit of internal organ he was holding. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "They wanted the autopsy hurried." He looked uncomfortable, as if we'd caught him in the act of doing something shameful. "I didn't know anyone would be coming in to . . ."

"How long's he been dead?" Fowler asked.

Henke shrugged. "Not that easy to tell," he replied. "Three or four days, at most."

"He drowned?"

"No," he said. "It looks as though his neck was broken before he hit the water." To me, as if I were the next of kin or something, he added softly, "He never felt a thing, after that."

I smiled at him.

Back upstairs I made all the arrangements for having Gilliam's body shipped and took

possession of his personal effects, which included his wallet, keys, loose change, receipts—but nothing remarkable.

I called Chavez to let him know that I'd identified the body and that I would probably be on my way back to Fort Lewis that night if I could get a flight out of Ellsworth.

He seemed rather more impatient than he had sounded earlier, as if he had a thousand more important things to do than to talk with me, which, I supposed, was his way of dealing with his own feeling of guilt.

He got busy, and I got angry.

Fowler, who had been hovering around while this was going on, looked like a man with something on his mind, but he was having a hard time finding the words to tell me what it was. I didn't make it easy for him, however.

For some reason, I was taking it out on him.

When we got back in the car, and started back to White Wolf, he found his voice. "I wish you'd told me," he said harshly.

"Told you what?" I said, matching his tone.

He glared at me, then floored the accelerator.

"What's the hurry?" I asked him.

He sighed with irritation. "I wish you'd mentioned that Giliham was black."

I stared at him.

He tried to ignore me for a few seconds, then shifted on his seat uncomfortably. "I suppose you think it shouldn't make any difference."

"Does it?"

His mouth set in a grim straight line while he thought. When he spoke next, there was anger in his voice. "We've got some real hardcases in White Wolf," he said. "Real throwbacks, you know what I mean?"

"Not entirely."

He nodded. "Well, it may not mean anything, but..." He shook his head. "We'll see."

We got back to the Good Haven Inn at just before eleven.

Inside Fowler asked Bess Dykstra if her son was there. She gave him a startled look, then nodded toward the bar, which was closed.

We found him behind the bar, getting it ready to open.

"Hello, Jerome," Fowler said to him as we walked in.

Jerome Dykstra was the same scowling young man I'd seen at the front desk earlier, and his sneering nod at me when I entered the room behind Fowler indicated he also recalled the pleasure of our earlier meeting.

Fowler took a stool at the bar and I sat next to him. "This is Mr. Virginiak. Say hello to the man, Jerome."

Jerome looked from Fowler to me but said nothing.

Fowler sighed. "This is one of those throwbacks I was tellin' you about, Mr. Virginiak. A real diehard."

The young man began polishing shot glasses.

"Ran into an old friend of yours the other day, Jerome," Fowler said easily. "Homer Falk. He didn't say to say hello."

"He ain't no friend of mine," Jerome said quietly.

"Oh?" Fowler raised his heavy eyebrows in mock surprise, then turned to me. "Jerome here and Homer used to run together. Had them a kind of club." He frowned and bit his lip, turning back to Jerome. "What did you call yourselves, Jerome?"

The young man studied a glass he'd been rubbing.

"White Trash, wasn't it, Jerome?"

Jerome scowled at the policeman. "White First!" he corrected him.

Fowler nodded. "That's it. White First. How could I have forgotten?"

Jerome sighed and picked up another glass.

"You see," Fowler told me, "Jerome and Homer and a few other of their friends in high school, they got it into their pea brains, that they were . . . special, you know. Something about bein' white, and how that meant

they were better than other folks." He paused and looked at Jerome, who still avoided the policeman's eyes. "Especially colored folks. Isn't that right, Jerome?"

Jerome didn't answer.

"In fact," Fowler continued, "it was Jerome here, and his old compadre Homer, who first saw the threat. White Wolf was bein' invaded. Mongrelized, isn't that what you called it, Jerome?"

"That's what it was," the young man confirmed matter-of-factly.

Fowler nodded. "Uh-huh."

Jerome looked at Fowler, then at me. There was a smirking grin on his face.

Fowler said: "This piece of crap and his friends used to run Saturday night raids over on the north side. Break windows, set fires—and if there were enough of them, and they happened to spot some inferior person out walkin' by himself, they'd break a few bones to get their point across." He glared at the young man, whose smile had gone. "Big brave boys, right, Jerome?"

Jerome tried not to, but he swallowed.

"Couple years back," Fowler told me, in a recovered conversational tone, "these white heroes raped a little girl. Fourteen years old. Little slip of a thing. They beat her and raped her, right outside her home."

Bess Dykstra had come in

from the lobby and was hovering at the end of the bar, just within earshot.

"I arrested them," Fowler told me, "but they got away with it. The girl's parents left the state with her. I had no witnesses, so I had to let them go."

"That's ancient history!" Bess Dykstra piped up. "Jerry doesn't run with that crowd any more."

Fowler looked over at the woman and shook his head. "Bess," he said tiredly, "you don't know."

"What is all this?" Jerome whined.

Fowler turned back to the young man and said, "Last Sunday night or Monday morning a man came here, looking for a room for the night."

Jerome shrugged.

"He was soldier. A colored soldier."

Jerome's mouth twisted. "So?"

"You turned him away, didn't you, Jerome?"

"He never did no such thing!" his mother snapped; then to her son she said, "You don't answer another question without a lawyer, Jerry. Do you hear me?"

Jerome smirked and shook his head.

"The man's dead, Jerome."

The young man's smile froze. "What?"

"Oh, God," Bess Dykstra moaned, then waved both hands at her son. "Not another word,

Jerry. I'm gonna call Mr. Denison now." She began backing slowly toward the lobby. "You got no right to question that boy any more, Maxwell Fowler. You just wait!"

We all watched her reluctant leaving, then Fowler said to Jerome: "Well?"

The young man blinked, frowned, then looked down at the bar cloth in his hands.

"Fine," Fowler snapped, and removed a pair of shiny handcuffs from his belt. He tossed them onto the bar top. "Come around the end of the bar, Jerome."

The young man looked up.

Fowler grinned at him. "Believe me, Jerome. If you make any trouble, I *will* enjoy it!"

Jerome stared at the handcuffs, swallowed, and shook his head. "I didn't do it."

"You have the right to remain silent, Jerome."

"I didn't *do* it!" the young man repeated. "I mean . . . I didn't *kill* him, for Christ sake. I just wouldn't rent him a room. Is that a crime?"

Fowler snorted. "Sounds like a crime to me." He waved a hand at the end of the bar. "Come around, Jerome."

"You know what I mean," Jerome shouted. "I just told the nigger to get out. That's all!"

"And what did he say, Jerome?"

"Nothin'! He just left."

Fowler looked at me, saw me shake my head, turned back to Dykstra. "We think you're lying, Jerome."

The young man made a sound with his lips.

"Jerome," Fowler said in a tight and genuinely angry voice. "You come around the bar, with your hands behind your head, right this minute or so help me," he nudged the nightstick at his belt, "I'll come and get you the hard way."

The young man held up both hands. "Wait a sec, *will ya!*" He shook his head. "Jus' lemme think!"

"Jerome?"

"I've got witnesses!" Jerome said.

"Who?"

Jerome's eyebrows joined over his nose in a furious effort of thought. "I can't remember . . ."

"That's it," Fowler said quietly, removing his nightstick. He walked to the end of the bar, went around it, and started toward the young man. "Jerome, you worthless little turd, you are under arrest. . . ."

"I told him to go to Hacker Street," Dykstra whined, his hands up in front of him. "I told him we were full up."

Fowler paused in mid-stride and looked at me.

"Did he believe you?" I asked.

Dykstra shrugged. "How

should I know?" he complained; then he saw Fowler start toward him again. "Okay! Okay!" he shouted. "He *didn't* believe me." He shrugged again. "But what could he do?" He looked from Fowler to me, then back to Fowler. "He left, and I never saw him again. I swear to God!"

"What's Hacker Street?" I asked.

"I know it," Fowler told me. He turned to Dykstra. "Did you give him directions, Jerome, or did you think he'd get there by some divine insight?"

"Huh?"

"Did you tell him how to get there, Jerome?"

He nodded. "Yeah, sure I did. I told him there was a rooming house there for . . . his kind." He looked over at me. "I really did try to help him, you know."

"I'm sure."

"I *did!*"

I slid off the bar stool and looked at Fowler.

The policeman nodded at me, then looked at Jerome, and then at his nightstick with a certain wistfulness. Finally he put it away. "I might be back, Jerome," he told the young man. "So don't make any plans."

The north side of White Wolf, which we had skirted on the way out to the Falk ranch, looked like a frayed edge of a garment that

kept getting stitched back together instead of being replaced.

The buildings there were older, dirtier, with patchwork carpentry dotting the walls and graffiti everywhere, explaining the situation.

We crossed a double set of long disused railroad tracks and turned down a road that fronted what had been a riverfront train station at one time but was now a county-run shelter for the homeless. It looked as if it was doing good business. A little farther on we came to what appeared to be a warehouse, but that was where Fowler parked, next to several other cars, and we got out.

As we did so, however, the policeman tripped the siren switch on the dashboard, just for a second, so that a single but piercing *swoop* echoed down the deserted street. He looked at me and said, "Oops," then stood out in the middle of the street.

It was dead quiet.

"Woman by the name of Garbett runs this place," Fowler told me. "She doesn't like me much."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "We've raided this place a few times." He waved an arm expansively around the area. "A lot of criminal activity going on down here. We try to clean it up. Not that it works for long."

I looked at him, standing there in the street, and he caught me staring at him. "Just a minute more," he told me, then grinned. "Gotta give 'em time to get ready for me, if you know what I mean."

I didn't at first, but then I heard a door slam somewhere deep in the building and I suddenly understood, and I started liking the big man for the first time.

"I guess they're ready now," he said finally.

We stepped through the outside door of the building. A sign bolted on the wall beside it read ROOMS TO LET FOR WORKING MEN, and a smaller, hand-painted piece of cardboard was attached to it: SEE NO. 1.

Inside the door, warm, heavy, and sour smells assaulted us.

There was a girl, about fourteen or fifteen, talking on the pay phone that hung on the wall by the entrance. She stopped talking and gaped at us as we walked past her.

Fowler knocked at the first door we came to, and it opened immediately, to the extent that it could given the heavy chain lock attached to it. A pair of wary eyes peered out at us, and the sound of a soap opera leaked into the air.

"Chief Fowler, Willa. Open up, okay?"

The eyes surveyed us for a sec-

ond more, then the door closed sharply and opened again, this time all the way, revealing a thin, sharp-featured black woman of indeterminable middle to old age who stared at us with stony dislike.

"Willa," Fowler said. "How've you been?"

She made a sound with her mouth that was part raspberry, part sigh, then turned her back to us and moved into the room. We followed her and stood just inside the door while she seated herself in front of a small-screened TV in the middle of the single room apartment, next to a glowing electric heater, and ignored us.

"Willa . . ." Fowler began, but the woman waved a hand sharply at him and said, "Jus' a minute. S'almost over."

Fowler sighed, then shrugged at me and leaned against the wall by the door.

It was a very small studio, with very little furnishing. Against one wall was a narrow, metal-framed cot that was piled high with pillows; against the wall behind us were several racks of clothes, men's and women's, dangling on metal hangers; on the left was a tiny kitchenette, with a tiny icebox, tiny sink, and two burner stove. The TV, bracketed by the speakers of a disassembled stereo, was propped up on a cardboard box

against the wall in front of us. Up above were two large blue-tinted windows which were partially covered by a pair of bamboo-slatted blinds. The ceiling was a maze of naked pipe, the floor littered with carpet remnants, and the walls with posters with sexual and music themes.

The tiny apartment simultaneously reminded me of factories, back alleys, storage closets, and garage sales, but it was clean, and had a fresh smell about it that didn't come from a can.

We stood and waited while the soap opera played itself out. After which the woman made a sound of disgust, then turned the set off and walked over to the kitchenette where she started a tea kettle going on the stove. She was ignoring us again.

"Willa?" Fowler said.

She stared at the wall over the stove for a second or two, then turned to face us, folding her arms defensively in front of her. She sighed wearily. "Whatchu want, Fowler?"

"This is Mr. Virginiak, of Army Counter-Intelligence," he told her, nodding at me.

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Garbett," I said to her.

She didn't look particularly happy to meet me, however. "Okay," she said, cocking her

head in my direction. "Whatchu want, then?"

I smiled. "Mrs. Garbett," I said, "did you rent a room to a man last Sunday night, or early Monday morning? An army officer by the name of Gilliam?"

She kept her arms crossed tightly. "Maybe."

"It's important," Fowler said.

"Why?"

"Because he's dead," I told her.

Her eyes widened.

"Did he stay here, Mrs. Garbett?" I asked.

"He's dead?"

"Yes."

"Oh," she said with genuine remorse. "It can't be!"

"It was an accident," Fowler said. "Out on Route 20."

She groaned again and went back to her chair. "That poor boy," she said. "He was so nice, too."

"He did stay here, then?"

She nodded, but her gaze had turned inward.

"How long?"

"Just the one night," she said.

"Are you *sure* it was an accident?"

Fowler shrugged. "That's how it looks."

She snorted, then looked back at me. "When black folks die suddenly around this town it's always an accident."

"Come on, Willa," Fowler said.

"Come on, yourself!" she

barked, then looked at me again. "You bein' a soldier. Were you a friend of that boy?"

"Yes," I told her, and felt my ears burn.

She nodded, then pointed a finger at Fowler. "Then you don't trust *anythin'* this man says, you hear?" She shook her head bitterly. "I've lived in this town more'n twenty years, and let me tell you, you don't trust the po-lice here. You just don't." She glared over at Fowler, who avoided her eyes. "I come from a cracker county in south Georgia," she continued, "and let me tell you, that was a *para*-dise compared to this stinkhole."

Fowler sighed again.

"So you don't trust that man!" she told me again. "That is, *if* you really wanna know what happened to your friend."

"I do want to know," I told her.

"Could I see the room he rented?"

"Hmmp," she said, then stood up. "It's down the hall."

We followed her down to a small, cell-like room at the back of the building and went inside for a look, but there was nothing to see there except for the last steel-framed cot Lieutenant Gilliam would have slept in, the sink where he'd last shaved, and the dirty mirror over it where he had his last look at himself.

Back in the hall, I asked her if Gilliam had had any visitors.

"No," she told me, flicking a glance at Fowler. "I run a clean place here, no matter what *he* may have told you."

"How about phone calls?"

"I don't think so."

"What time did Gilliam check out?"

She shrugged. "It was around noon," she replied. "Said he was goin' to Beaumont."

"Did he say why?"

She blinked at me. "Yes," she said. "He'd asked me where the Bureau of Records was, and I told him that it was at the county seat. Over in Beaumont."

"The Bureau of Records?"

She nodded. "That's it. Said he wanted to check out births and deaths," she said, then frowned. "Does that help?"

It didn't, but I thanked her, and Fowler and I started out.

At the doorway, the girl on the telephone was just hanging up, and she gave us both a suspicious look as we let her leave the building in front of us. As she did so, I noticed the graffiti on the wall beside the telephone—doodles, obscenities, names, and numbers—one of which caught my eye.

Not that it was a number familiar to me, and not that it was written in a hand that I recognized.

But there was something about the number that caught and

held my attention for a moment—triggered by a memory or idea, harbored well below the surface of my conscious mind—all I could do was stare at it stupidly for a few seconds until Fowler asked me if I was coming.

Back in Fowler's car, the policeman seemed uncomfortable. He said, "I told you she didn't like me very much."

"You were right about that."

He looked at me. "Believe it or not, I've never given her reason to think the way she does of me. The old chief might have, I don't know, but I've never done my job any more or less down here, than I do above Hacker Street. Believe me."

"I do," I told him.

He looked at me and nodded. "So what now?"

"I guess that depends."

"On what?"

"On whether you think Gilliam simply had an accident, or something else."

He chewed at the inside of his lower lip and said, "You're thinking about that Dykstra kid?"

"You know him better than I."

He sighed. "Unfortunately, I do. I've been around trash like that all my life, Mr. Virginiak. Occupational hazard." He sighed again and looked at me. "But I think Jerome was telling the

truth. He just isn't that good a liar, you know?"

I nodded. It had sounded like the truth to me, too.

He started the car and headed us back toward the inn.

I said, "You mentioned that Dykstra and Homer Falk had been friends."

"Right," he agreed. "Maybe not *real* friends, though. Homer is kind of a hick, if you know what I mean. Not the sort of kid a snot nose like Jerome would normally have anything to do with. But in high school their 'common interests' brought them together, I guess. They probably haven't laid eyes on one another since then."

I lit a cigarette.

Fowler looked at me. "This background investigation," he said. "On Roger, I mean. Will you be conducting it now?"

"No," I told him. "But someone will."

He nodded. "It's just that I don't want you to think that Roger Falk is anything like his cousin." He said with certainty, "Roger was a real good kid."

"Okay."

"Not like Homer at all."

It had started to rain again, and Fowler had to slow the van. "Homer'd probably be in prison if it wasn't for Lee," he said.

I looked at him.

"After Clement died," said Fowler, "Lee put a tight rein on

the boy. He's hardly ever in town any more—which is a good thing. He's got some bad blood in him."

"Really."

He nodded again. "Clement—that was Homer's pa. He took off himself about a year or so after Lee went into the army." He paused to squint into the past. "I think the old man just kicked him out, but I don't know for sure. He'd always been pretty wild. Smart in a wily kind of way, but bad-tempered. Got fighting mad, real quick. Always lookin' for a fight." He maneuvered the van back onto the main street of White Wolf even more slowly. "Anyway," he went on, "next I heard, Clement was doing time in the Nevada State Penitentiary for armed robbery. After that I heard he did some time in Utah for manslaughter. When he came back, about seven, eight years ago, he had a wife and little boy with him, and the old man let them stay out at the ranch."

He paused to squint again at the memory. "Funny. I don't remember her name. Homer's ma, that is. Small woman. Pretty, I recall. I don't know why she stayed with him. We'd get a call at least once or twice a year from the county hospital about her. We'd go over and question her, and she'd be all beat up, but she wouldn't sign a complaint. I

don't understand women like that. Do you?"

"Not really," I admitted. "But then I don't understand men like that either."

"Yeah. Well. She died. Then Old Man Falk died, and Homer—he was about seventeen or so—he went a little wild himself. Lee had come home by then. Brought his own wife and boy with him, but she took off after about a year."

"And then Clement fell off his horse," I said.

"That's right," he said. "It hasn't been an easy life for the Falks."

Back at the Good Haven's parking lot, I asked Fowler: "You've been doing a lot of talking about the Falk family."

"They keep coming up."

"Do they?"

He frowned at me.

"What I mean is, is there some reason they're on your mind? Something you should tell me?"

He scratched his head self-consciously. "Nah. I'm just gettin' old. Runnin' off at the mouth is gettin' to be a bad habit of mine."

I opened the car door, but he put a hand on my arm and said, "What do you think Gilliam was doing going to Beaumont?"

"Verifying the personal histories of immediate family members is a routine part of any

background check. It was part of his job." I got out of the car, closed the door, then said to him through the window, "Thanks for squiring me around, chief. I guess I'll be leaving myself now."

He squinted at me, as if he might have something else to say, but then held out his hand. "Nice meeting you, Mr. Virginiak."

I shook his hand. "Same here, Chief Fowler."

After booking myself on a flight out of Ellsworth, later in the day, I checked out of the Good Haven Inn, and I had little to say to Bess Dykstra doing so. She took my money and gave me a receipt, and although I was hungry and the dining room beckoned with some heady smells, I left.

I reserved the right to refuse being *served* by anyone.

I found a coffee shop in the middle of town, and had a hamburger, fries, and several cups of coffee, killing the time until the moment I would have to leave White Wolf—without having punched anyone in the face, which was what I felt like doing.

I was *not* in a good mood.

I'd brought in my briefcase, which contained Gilliam's own smaller letter case. Though still damp, it was not dripping wet and, having nothing else to do, I went through it.

Inside was a wet manila folder, containing his travel orders and the file on Roger Falk. There was the picture of the young man stapled to it. He looked as fresh and as eager as he should have.

There was also a copy of the service record and a picture of his father—the sergeant-major—a good Xerox of an eight by ten service photo, in full dress, his medal of honor standing by itself over his left pocket. Some water spots had puckered his face, but he had the same wild black eyes.

Falk looked a bit younger in the picture than he had in person, but the beard, and a few added years accounted for that. A few years, and a lot of grief.

I put the folder away, and looked through Gilliam's wallet again. Sticking up out of the billfold was a receipt for his rented automobile. At the bottom of the receipt he had signed his name, and added his social security number under that. . . .

I don't know how long I sat there, staring at the number, but my coffee had gone stone cold by the time I got out of there.

The street outside Willa Garbett's roominghouse seemed more alive when I drove up. There were children playing in the street, and some

semi-adults lounging against the walls scowled at me as I went past.

I parked and moved by a cluster of teens who were standing in front of the rooming house "listening" to a multi-speakered ghetto blaster at full crank and stepped inside.

On the wall, above the pay phone, was the number.

I couldn't say when I might have noticed it, or why such a thing would have lodged itself in some synaptic crevice of my brain, but it was there.

At some time, on some occasion, during the short time Lieutenant Robert Gilliam had worked in our office I had seen something, some log, some report—something—on which he had written a number referring to some quantity or time, I don't know, but that number had contained a zero, a zero, with the same diagonal curlicue as the zero on the wall above the pay phone.

There was a telephone book dangling from a chain underneath the telephone, and I looked for Lee Falk's listing first.

The number was his.

I leaned against the wall and tried to think what this told me, but beyond the fact that Gilliam had written the sergeant-major's number on the wall, nothing came to mind.

Falk had told me that Gilliam hadn't called, and there was no reason I could think of why he would lie. On the other hand, calling ahead would be what I would have done had I been Gilliam.

The door behind me opened just then, and Willa Garbett trundled through with an armful of groceries.

She blinked at me suspiciously for a second, then recognized me. "You back?"

"Yes," I said, putting down the phone book and taking one of her parcels.

She snorted and opened the door to her apartment. "You come back to make a call, boy?"

"No," I said. "Mrs. Garbett . . ."

"Willa," she said with a smile, taking her parcel back.

"Willa, did Lieutenant Gilliam mention that he might go somewhere else before going to Beaumont?"

"No," she said. "He said he'd already conducted his business here in town, and that he had to go to Beaumont to check somethin' out."

"He had gone out *earlier*, then?"

She blinked at me. "Acourse he did. Didn't I say that?" She tapped her head. "I didn't, did I? I'm sorry. I plumb forgot . . ."

"Did he say where he had gone to conduct his business?"

She frowned at me. "No," she said. "I don't think so."

I waited while she frowned a bit more, but then she shook her head. "No," she said. "He didn't say. He went out early, though, about seven or eight. Got back around eleven, just when *World* comes on."

"Did he make any calls, that you know of?"

She shook her head slowly.

Back in my car, I decided to see Fowler again. I didn't know where my thinking was headed, but I needed someone to talk to, so I drove to the police station where I was told the chief was out.

I drove around the small, smudgy town for a while, then slowly made my way back out onto the highway where I turned left toward Beaumont.

Beaumont was where Gilliam had been headed. The Bureau of Records. I didn't know what I was going to do there, but that's where I decided to go.

I never made it.

At the hairpin turn where Gilliam's car had gone into the river, Captain Blaney and the two officers who'd been there earlier were walking about fifty meters up the road from the collapsed guard rail.

Blaney didn't seem surprised to see me. He wouldn't. He said, "You just missed Chief Fowler."

"He was here?"

He nodded. "Just left," he told me, pointing to a spot near a dented section of guardrail. "That's where we found the glass."

I got out of my own car and looked where he pointed. "What glass?"

"Thought you'd know." He led me to his car. From the trunk he pulled out a paper sack which held broken glass. "Chief Fowler called me about an hour or so back. Said that your friend's accident mightn'ta been one after all."

"Oh?"

He jiggled the bag of glass. "This here is glass from a headlight—but it ain't from your friend's car."

"I see."

"The T'bird's lights were covered." He put the bag away, then led me to where one of his men was measuring the faint outline of a skidmark. "Coulda been this way," Blaney told me. "Your friend was comin' down the hill and got bumped from the back." He pointed to the dented guardrail. "Looks like he slammed into that sideways. We got some paint residue outa them scratches, and it could be the same as the T'bird's."

"How about from the back of his car?"

He nodded. "I just called in to the yard and they're goin' over it now."

I looked over the scene and tried to imagine something innocent, but it was hard. "If Gilliam's car hit here, I don't see how it could have carried on through the guardrail down there."

"Neither do I," Blaney agreed. "Unless it was pushed."

I tried to imagine that, and it was easier to do so. I looked at Blaney. "This could simply be evidence from some previous accident here. Something old."

Blaney shrugged. "Maybe—but Fowler's got the scent of something." He looked at me with something approaching curiosity in his face. "You got any ideas?"

I shook my head. Not because I didn't have any ideas but because I had too many. I asked, "Did Fowler say where he was headed?"

"Not to me."

"Can you call in to his station and find out if they knew where he's gone?"

He could and he did, but Fowler had not called in.

I left Blaney and his men there in the road, and drove back to town. In front of the police station, Fowler's truck was still gone, so I took his stall, intending to go inside to wait for him, but instead I just sat where I was and tried to sort out what

was likely from what was possible—but that wasn't easy.

What was most likely, I knew, was that Fowler knew something that I didn't. It was something Gilliam himself had probably known as well.

Something that made his death mandatory.

But I couldn't imagine what that was.

I did know, however, one thing that Fowler didn't—and that was the fact that Gilliam had made a trip that morning before he left for his date with the river, but there the possibilities became too vast in number.

Where had he gone?

Gilliam's letter-case was beside me on the car seat, and I spilled out its still damp contents once again.

Lee Falk's service photo caught my eye.

The water spots had dried, and where a large one had somewhat marred the grainy pixels of the Xerox, just over his left eye, I saw something I hadn't noticed before. Falk had a small, half-moon shaped scar in his forehead that cut down into the top of his eyebrow.

I stared at it for a moment—then I turned the picture over.

Homer Falk was just emerging from the ranchhouse as I drove into the yard. He was holding a

suitcase in his hands, and he put it down on the porch and stared at me as I parked, got out of the car, and approached him. "Uncle Lee ain't here," he told me suspiciously.

"Do you know where I could find him?"

He shook his head. "Uh-uh."

I waved a hand at the suitcase. "Going somewhere, Homer?"

He didn't answer. Instead he picked up the suitcase, tossed it into the back of the pickup—which was parked in front of the stairs and was already piled high with various household goods—then stalked back into the house.

While he did so, I checked the front of the truck.

The front bumper and grille had clearly been caved in and then pounded back into serviceable condition. Also, the left headlight was so new it still had a price marker stuck into one corner.

Homer took his time coming out again, and when he did, he was carrying a short black tire iron in his hands. He seemed a bit impatient at finding me still there. "What do you want around here anyway?" he demanded.

"I want to ask your uncle some questions, Homer."

He shook his head. "No, you don't," he said with certainty.

"You wanna just get along. Believe me."

"Where is your uncle, Homer?"

"I don't know."

"When is he coming back?"

"I don't know."

I nodded. "Then I'll wait."

"No," he told me, hefting the tire iron in front of his chest in a semi-threatening way. "You better just get along now, before . . ."

"Before what, Homer?" I snapped at him, feeling somewhat angry.

He blinked, swallowed, then shook his head. "You're makin' a big mistake, fella . . ."

"Really?" I said, climbing the stairs, and watching him back to the door. "I don't think so, Homer."

He swallowed again and let the tire iron drop to his side. "Look . . ."

"Have you seen Chief Fowler, Homer?"

He shook his head. "I'm tellin' you, mister . . ."

I stepped closer to him. "You're not telling me anything, Homer. Not so far. But you will. I promise you that."

The young man drew himself up and glared at me.

"There's a man dead, Homer. The man I asked you about yesterday. Remember?"

Homer's eyes narrowed.

"Somebody ran him off the

road," I told him. "Somebody rammed his car from behind and he went into the river." I nodded toward the pickup. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Homer?"

His brow furrowed. "You're lyin'."

I poked him then, in the chest with a stiff finger, and he stepped back; his eyes suddenly filling with tears of anger and fear. "Back off!" he said hoarsely.

I felt a little ashamed of myself, but I prodded the young man again. "The man's dead, Homer."

He took a few deep ragged breaths. "Okay!" he complained. "Okay!"

I closed on him again. "Tell me what you know about it, Homer."

He swallowed hard, and looked away from me. "Back off, will ya."

"Talk to me, Homer."

"Jesus!" he said in exasperation, moving sideways to get away from me. "He was only a nigger, you know!"

I dropped my hands, and took a step back. "Really," I said to him.

He looked at me.

"Now, how did you know he was black, Homer?"

He swallowed, then frowned at me for a moment as his mind sifted through the lies and tried to come up with another—but

he finally gave up. "Leave me alone," he said roughly, and he tried to get past me to the door. "Get outa my way."

I blocked his path by putting out a hand, but he knocked it down, then turned on me, suddenly, swinging wildly with the tire iron. I grabbed his wrist, and turned his hand to his face as hard as I could, and the tool spun out of his grasp and into the dirt beside the porch. I twisted and bent the joint of his wrist until he went to his knees, and let out a thin yelp. I said, "Where's your uncle, Homer?"

"I don't know!" he wailed. "I swear!"

"Where's Chief Fowler?"

He started to sob. "It hurts," he pleaded. "It hurts!"

"Why did you kill Lieutenant Gilliam?"

"I *didn't*!" he yelled. "I never killed *nobody*. I swear I didn't!"

I bent his wrist back a centimeter more.

"It hurts!" he screamed.

"Homer," I told him. "You don't know what hurt is—"

Just then, a car pulled up very fast into the front yard.

It was Fowler's squad car, but Fowler wasn't driving.

I released the boy, who whimpered and moved away from me, and watched as the car stopped and Falk got out holding a pump-action shotgun and grinning from ear to ear. He was hatless

and wearing no bandanna this time.

There was also no scar in his left eyebrow.

"Well, well, well," he said to me, motioning me away from Homer. "Nice to see you again, Mr. Virginiak." He looked down at Homer, who was sitting on the ground by the pickup. "Whatchu doin' down there, boy?" he asked pleasantly. "This man here givin' you a rough time?" He looked back at me, and motioned again with the barrel of the gun. "Hands behind your head."

I did as he told me. "Where's Fowler, Clement?"

He peered at me, then nodded at the car. "He's in the back seat," he said. "Whyn't you have a look?" He jerked his head toward the car, and I went.

Fowler was on the back seat, slumped over on his side. His face was bloodied and he was handcuffed.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

"Not yet," Falk told me, then to his son he said, "Hom, get yer ass up outa there."

"Yes, Pa," the boy replied, getting to his feet.

Clement Falk sighed. "Willow Stream was too damn low. The damn car wouldn'ta been covered." He snorted. "Damn good thing I come back when I did, eh, boy?"

"Yes, Pa."

"I had a better idea anyway," Clement said, nodding at his son. "Yer gonna have to help me."

Homer stared fearfully at his father.

"You hear me, boy?"

The young man licked his lips, looked at me, then shook his head. "Let's jus' go, Pa!"

His father glared at his son. "You'll do just as I say, boy. You hear me?"

Homer sobbed. "I don't want to kill *nobody*, Pa."

Clement, still holding the barrel of the shotgun level at my chest, kicked angrily at Homer's leg. "Get aholdta yourself, boy. I need you *now*."

"Don't do it, Homer," I said.

Falk's flinty eyes clicked back to me. "Shut up!"

"It's all coming apart, Clement. There's no point in getting the boy involved."

"You don't know what yer talkin' about."

"Don't I?" I looked at Homer. "You haven't killed anyone, have you, son?"

The young man blinked at me.

"It was your father who killed Lieutenant Gilliam, wasn't it?"

Homer swallowed, and looked down at the ground.

"Boy!" Clement snapped. "You pick up that tire iron."

Homer hesitated a second, then

picked up the tool and looked at it.

Clement smiled and nodded. "That's right," he said. "We gotta make this all look right, Hom." He jiggled the weapon at me. "We gotta do him like I did Fowler."

Homer still stared silently at the tire iron in his hands.

"Then we take'em up to Mustang Ridge," Falk went on, "by the old boundary road—you know the one I mean, boy?"

"I know," Homer replied quietly.

Clement smiled again at me. "We gotta make it look just right."

"Like an accident?" I asked. "Another one?"

"Uh-huh," he said.

"Like your brother?"

He snorted. "You think you're pretty smart, don't ya?"

I shrugged. "It wasn't that hard to figure out," I told him. "You're not that bright. Too many accidents, Clement. First your brother to get the ranch, then Gilliam when he figured out you weren't Lee Falk, and now Fowler, and me." I looked at Homer. "He's going to get you hanged, Homer. Don't listen to him."

Falk smirked at me. "Go ahead and bash'im, boy. We gotta get goin'."

"Don't do it, Homer," I said.

Homer stood and stared at me.

"Hurry it up, boy!" Clement warned him.

"So far," I told the young man, "you haven't done any more than cover up for your father. That's something people can understand. That's something a jury could understand." I shook my head again. "But if you help him kill me, you're in it up to your neck."

"He's in it already," Clement barked, raising the shotgun to a level with my eyes. "Do it now, boy!"

"You're not involved, yet, Homer . . ."

"He is involved," Clement shouted. "Now shut up!"

Homer shook his head, still staring at the tire iron in his hand. "Pa . . ."

"Do it, boy," Clement said, moving closer to his son and giving him a nudge with the stock of the shotgun. "Do it!"

Homer looked at his father for a second, then took a step toward me.

"Think, Homer," I told him. "Think!"

Homer stared at me, and hesitated.

"Boy," Clement snapped, moving the barrel of the gun against his son's shoulder. "Do you hear me?"

Homer blinked, looked down—then suddenly swung the tire

iron up and then down on top of the shotgun's barrel. The gun went off, its blast digging a hole next to my left foot and sending a few stinging pellets into my ankle.

The gun, however, had been knocked from Falk's grasp, and the kick of the weapon sent him backward a few steps. He cursed, then lunged forward toward the weapon, but by that time I was standing on it. He tried to pull it out from under my feet, but I pushed him away.

"Don't hurt him," Homer said to me. "Okay?"

Clement roared with rage and came at me with his head down. I snapped him upright with a knee under the chin, then I put him away with an open hand to the throat, and another in the solar plexus. He collapsed in the dirt, gagging and gasping; I picked up the shotgun.

Homer knelt beside his father. "I asked you not to hurt him."

I found another set of handcuffs in Fowler's Bronco, and put them on Falk, moved him to the back seat of my car, and told him that I'd shoot to kill if he got out. He seemed to believe me.

Which is a good thing because I was still in a bad mood and I think I meant it.

I ordered Homer to the porch. He was obedient enough, and

seemed a little relieved that I didn't put him with his father.

Before calling the station for help and an ambulance, I performed a little first aid on Fowler, who had a dangerous looking wound just over his eye. It appeared survivable, though. I also did some work on myself, but the pellets from the shotgun blast had merely torn up a little skin over my ankle.

By the time the ambulance and two additional squad cars had arrived, Fowler was conscious, but he remained on the back seat of the Bronco until the paramedics got him on a stretcher, and then the both of us into the ambulance.

Captain Blaney had arrived by then and took charge in his quiet, unflappable way. Homer, handcuffed and with his head down, was walked past his father to one police vehicle, and his father cursed him and his mother in a low, measured, and menacing way that made me feel sorry for the young man.

"You say that kid helped you take Clement?" Fowler asked me as we watched from the window of the ambulance.

"He did that."

Fowler sighed raggedly. "I was sure wrong about that boy."

"Not entirely, I think."

"But you don't think he knew his father killed Gilliam?"

"He had to suspect what his

father had done, but he did seem surprised when I told him Gilliam was dead." I sat down on the stretcher across from Fowler. "Anyway, it fits with what we've seen. Clement Falk doesn't seem like the sort of man who'd leave serious work to someone else."

The rear door of the ambulance closed, and I lay down. My ankle was starting to throb. I looked over at Fowler and said: "Why didn't you tell me that Lee and Clement Falk were twins?"

"It didn't occur to me."

"Really?"

He turned his good eye toward me. "Really," he insisted. "The fact is, I don't recall that they looked identically alike. I remember Clement as being . . . bigger, somehow." He shook his head, wincing at the pain. "But that was twenty-some-odd years ago," he added in a soft, tired voice. "I should have figured it out."

"You did."

He laughed shortly. "Right," he said. "A little late, though." He winced at the pain, then pressed gingerly at the compress over his eye. "When Willa said that Gilliam had been on his way over to Beaumont to check on births and deaths, it got me to thinkin' about it. I don't know what Gilliam suspected—if anything—but it did get me to thinkin' about how

maybe Clement had a pulled a switch." He paused. "Clement might have done Lee, too."

"It's possible. Maybe Homer knows."

Fowler took a few deep breaths. "But it was the truck that bothered me most. It had been botherin' me ever since I seen Gilliam's car. I went back to where the car went over and found some glass . . ."

"I know."

He gave me a curious look, then sighed. "Anyway, I put a call in to Blaney, and after he got there, I just had to come back and have a look at the damage on the pickup."

"Something else you didn't mention."

His good eye turned toward me again. "Hey," he said. "You're not on the city payroll."

"I did have an interest in this, you know."

"Yeah. Well. Things were coming together pretty fast." He shrugged. "I didn't want to make an accusation until I'd had a chance to talk with Homer. I never got the chance, though. Clement jumped me while I was looking over the pickup . . ." He paused suddenly and looked at me. "Hey! What brought you out here?"

"As soon as I knew Clement and Lee were twins . . ."

"And how did you know *that*?"

He had propped himself up on one elbow, so I reached over and pushed him back down. "Well?"

"A couple of things."

"Like what?"

"You remember when we came out here yesterday," I said, "and I saluted Falk?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, that's a pretty standard military courtesy, given to CMH winners. They get a salute, regardless of rank, and Falk should have been used to it. But he seemed just a bit too surprised by it—and then he just kind of *waved* back at me. Remember?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Sergeant-Major Lee Falk had been the command sergeant-major of a basic training regiment at Fort Dix, New Jersey, for three years before his retirement. The last thing he would have gotten sloppy about is a salute, no matter how long he'd been out of uniform."

"Well?"

"Then there was Lee Falk's picture."

He frowned at me. "What picture?"

"Gilliam had one in his letter-case. When I finally looked at it closely, I could see that there was a scar in the eyebrow, just over his left eye. It was hardly noticeable, but it was there—and Clement had been wearing that bandanna pretty low on his

forehead when we talked to him yesterday. Thinking back, I figured he could have been trying to hide something—something that wasn't there."

"Gilliam musta seen that there was no scar," Fowler muttered.

I nodded. "That's what probably tipped him off that the man he was talking to wasn't who he said he was." I shook my head. "He must have asked Falk about it. I don't know. But somehow Clement realized that Gilliam suspected something." I shrugged. "So Clement followed him. Back to town, waited for him to leave the rooming house and get on the highway to Beaumont, and then ran him off the road. Probably killed him before he put the car in the river."

Fowler frowned at me for a moment. "Wait a minute. All this . . . it only tells you that *maybe* the man you met yesterday wasn't Lee Falk. It doesn't tell you that Lee and Clement were twins."

"That's true."

"So? How did you figure it out?"

"Well, for one thing, if they hadn't been twins, you'd have

known it was Clement we were talking to yesterday and not Lee."

"Oh. Right."

"But you didn't know, so Clement *had* to be Lee's twin to fool you."

He was quiet for a minute. "I could have been in on it with him."

I looked at him. "It never crossed my mind."

Fowler grinned. "You know an honest cop when you see one, eh?"

"Not really."

"Oh?"

I smiled. "Gilliam had written the word 'twins' with a question mark on the back of Lee Falk's picture."

Fowler stared at me for a moment, then laughed. "You're some detective, Virginiak," he told me. "Some detective."

I started to laugh with him.

But then I remembered Gilliam—the real detective—a grinning, self-effacing young man, whom I never bothered to get to know and, now, never would.

And then, all I wanted to do was to forget the whole thing.

UNSOLVED

by
Ken Weber

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the October issue.

Any other town but Shorthorn would have written off old Doc Virgil long ago as an out-and-out certifiable nut case. Even by the most relaxed standards he was more than just eccentric. For one thing he made house calls, which to some of his colleagues was eccentric in itself. He made them, however, in the company of a pet skunk. The little beast didn't stay out in Doc's big Chrysler either; it accompanied him like a consultant, right into the patient's bedroom.

Another issue was Doc's waiting room. It was a greenhouse. During office hours, patients fought their way through a labyrinth of palm leaves, schefflera, and saxifraga sarmentosa to respond to Doc Virgil's shout of "Next!" He did not have a receptionist, officially. Nor a nurse.

Just being able to hear "Next!" was a problem in itself in the greenhouse. Doc loved country music—very loud country music. He had a theory that his plants did too, and that they grew especially well to the sound of fiddles and steel guitars. No one trying to answer the call "Next!" ever disputed this.

Yet some of Doc's notions had had other effects. He was a fanatic about dietary control of diabetes. Because of his relentless experimentation he had made some breakthroughs, which had been published and reprinted several times in the medical journals.

Perhaps the most serious matter, however, was Doc's drinking. To people outside Shorthorn, and to the few locals who eschewed his ministrations, Doc Virgil was a drunk. To everyone else he simply had a problem, and the villagers adjusted to it in the same way they had adjusted to the greenhouse, to the Ranch Boys at too many decibels, and to the skunk.

It was simple. No one in Shorthorn got sick on Thursdays. Thursday was Doc's day off. He faithfully celebrated that weekly recurrence by tying one on, which always culminated in Police Chief Gary Westlake carrying the little man from the back seat of the

huge old Chrysler at about two A.M., and laying him out in gentle repose in the greenhouse.

Of late, Chief Westlake had been especially careful while tip-toeing in with Doc, for fear of waking Petty. Petty—her real name was Petunia—was Doc's housekeeper or nurse or former mistress or even wife; no one knew for sure. Petty was no shrinking violet and, despite her diabetes, had a bottomless well of energy when it came to expressions of temper. Her battles with Doc were legendary, and she was to be avoided at moments like these. In fact, most of the people in Shorthorn avoided her, period. But without saying so. She was just one more element they were willing to adjust to because of old Doc. No one complained about her—or, indeed, about anything regarding Doc Virgil—because every family in the village at one time or another had had reason to be grateful to him. With his unorthodox methods—perhaps because of them—he had touched everyone in Shorthorn. Deeply.

Not least of all, Gary Westlake. That's why he sat so forlornly right now behind the wheel of Doc's car. It was dark out on the Fourth Concession, but the combined red and white flashes from his patrol car—Shorthorn's only one—and from the regional ambulance were continuous enough for him to see the bloodstains on the passenger seat. There were even more where Petunia's head had lain on the floor. They were clearly visible amid the unbelievable pile of paper towels, envelopes, and empty catfood packages. With his pen, Gary moved aside a chocolate-bar wrapper and some crumpled tissues to look at the ooze. She had bled a long time.

He was interrupted by Mel Hehn, his partner on Shorthorn's two-man force. "That forensic fella from th' region says it's okay t'move the car now." Mel stuck his head almost inside the driver's window. "Says they got ever'thing they need."

Gary had been waiting for that. He reached to find the adjuster under the seat so that he could move ahead to reach the pedals.

"Where are they taking Petty's body?" he asked Mel. "I want to see it again myself before Doc wakes up."

Doc Virgil was stretched out on the back seat in a Thursday stupor. He was covered with blood too, and in his hand was the scalpel that had finished Petty.

"Hospital, I guess," Mel replied. "I'll ask 'em. Uh . . . where yuh gonna put Doc?"

"The cell," Gary said. "At least till he wakes up."

Shorthorn had a single cell in the basement of the town hall cum police station and library.

"Tell that fellow from forensic I'll wait in my office. If I don't get this car out of here right now, the whole town will be snooping through it."

He turned the ignition key and, along with the motor, everything in the car roared to life: wipers, air conditioner, lights. From the specially mounted rear speakers, the Rolling Stones nearly lifted Gary's hat. It took him a minute to adjust everything.

"Mel!" he called to his partner, who had turned to walk away. "Mel, I've got to arrest old Doc all right. I don't want to, but I have to. Still, I don't think he did it. I've got at least three reasons to doubt it. You and I are going to have to dig deeper on this one."

What are the three items that have made Gary Westlake doubtful of Doc Virgil's guilt?

See page 133 for the solution to the August puzzle.

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FICTION

Checking Out

by Nick
O'Donohoe



At seven twenty, Louella Peters ironed a freshly laundered blouse, unplugged the iron, and waited for Jim to leave the house before going upstairs. At seven twenty-five she showered, dried herself, put on a robe, and went downstairs to check the iron.

At twenty-five to eight, she made a list for the day from her master list, filled a fish-shaped ice mold with water and put it in the freezer, rinsed her coffee cup, packed her briefcase, and set the barely warm iron on the stove.

At a quarter to eight, she put her coat on, walked out of the house, locked the door, unlocked it, went back in, and touched the iron.

At ten to eight, three blocks from home, she turned back around, unlocked the door, held her hand against the iron for ten seconds, relocked the door, and drove very fast to work. Even so she was ten minutes late.

At eight thirty, unable to bear it, she dialed her next door neighbor. "Terri, could you use my house key and check my iron to be sure it's off? It's on the stove."

Terri said, "This is a sickness."

Louella cringed. "Terri, I wouldn't ask if I wasn't worried—you know I wouldn't—"

"You know damn well you left it off. Why ask me?"

"Because the only other person I can call is Jim."

Silence. Then: "All right, honey, I'll check it."

Louella exhaled finally. "Oh, thank you."

"How are things between you and Jim?"

Louella didn't answer. Finally Terri said, "That bad?"

Louella rolled a pencil rapidly back and forth on the desk. "I don't know. He's angry all the time, and he's suddenly doing all these odd jobs around the house even though he never cared before."

"Maybe he thinks you'll be—" She finished more tactfully, "Maybe he thinks things will be better between you if the house is nice."

"I don't think so. Something's very wrong." She suddenly said, not wanting to at all, "We used to love each other—"

Terri let her cry, then said, "I'll call you, honey."

Five minutes later, Terri called her at work. "The iron is off. I knotted the cord around the handle. If you get worried again, honey, you just think of that knot around the handle."

"You're so good to me, Terri—"

Terri said fiercely, "Somebody ought to be," and hung up. Louella dried her eyes and went back to work.

Five minutes later, her phone rang. "Accounting. Louella Peters."

Jim said with mock worry, "Are you sure you unplugged the iron?"

"Oh." She flinched as though she'd been hit.

He laughed at her. "So, who checked the iron?"

She pulled her arms in tight. "How do you know, I mean—"

"You didn't call me out of work. Who checked it?"

"Terri. Please don't do this—"

"Bitch," he said casually, and she couldn't tell whether he meant her or Terri. "I wish, just once, that everyone would force you into living a normal day."

This, at least, she'd heard before. "I can't have normal days," she said dully.

"Jesus, what are you good for, then? Anyway, I called so you'd be nervous about calls at work, and so that you'd do the shopping. You won't forget?"

"You wrote it down. I asked you to—"

"Well, you can't be too careful. Say, did you leave the stove on?"

He laughed and hung up. Louella, shaking, stared at the phone.

Terri called back with the number of a therapist. "And you know, honey, they talked about people like you on *Donahue*. They say some problems are chemical and just need medicating—"

Louella thanked her and hung up quickly. She stared guiltily at her shopping list, added three more items, and got a little work done before noon.

She walked the aisles nervously at the hardware store until a teenager in a red jacket said kindly, "Can I help you?"

"Please." She fumbled with the list. "My husband wants these things."

He took the list from her and read it carefully. "Lime, huh? What's he doing?"

"I think that's for the lawn." She smiled nervously.

"Are the three sacks of concrete for the lawn, too?"

But he smiled, and Louella smiled back. "Oh, no. He's repairing the basement floor. He's been digging it up for a week; he's really very handy." And because he loved being handy, Jim would do large projects with very little prodding. Before their marriage, Louella had thought he did them out of love for her.

"That's nice." He handed the list back. "I'll carry this stuff to your car. Maybe your handy husband will carry it in for you."

"Maybe." She wrote a check. "Can you hold the check for an hour while I go to the bank?"

He laughed. "You shouldn't have told me. Just put tomorrow's date on it, ma'am."

"You're very kind." She meant it. Now there was something she wouldn't worry about.

At the bank, Louella transferred seventy dollars into checking

and, just to be sure, took a balance from savings. The teller left the window and returned with a number on a scrap of paper, saying in the careful voice that bank employees use, "This is before your transfer."

Louella looked blankly at the number: \$578.43. She wrote shakily under the teller's number: \$5,578.43. "Is this what you meant to write?"

"I'll check again." She returned quickly. "Mrs. Peters, there was a withdrawal yesterday of five thousand dollars."

"You're sure?" Louella clutched the counter edge. "You're absolutely sure?"

"Yes, ma'am. Your husband is also authorized to withdraw money from this account; perhaps he took it."

"But he didn't tell me." She looked around helplessly, aware that she looked foolish. "Why wouldn't he?"

The teller looked embarrassed. "Perhaps he wants to surprise you."

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

The clerk said, "If you want, we can pull his transaction slip and confirm his signature—"

"Oh, no," she said anxiously. "I believe you." She almost ran from the bank.

She stopped at home, checked the stove, checked that the ice mold was freezing properly, checked her master list and the stove again, drove like a madwoman, and was only ten minutes late for work. She left her coat in the car, hoping it wouldn't be obvious that she had just come in, but she still cringed when she passed Mr. Riverton in the hall.

She called Terri. "He took almost all our savings out."

"What? Why?"

Louella whispered, "He's planning something."

Terri said gently, "This is awful to ask, honey, but do you think he's seeing somebody else?"

Louella said blankly, "He told me about that. He tells me about it all the time."

"Bastard."

"Before he met her, he put up with me, but kept saying I was crazy. Then we stopped having sex—"

"You don't have to tell me this."

Louella shook her head quickly, even though Terri couldn't see

her. "No, it's all right. It was getting awful; he'd be mad at me, then he'd be nice for one night, and right away he'd go back to mad. Then we quit, and two weeks later he told me about this other woman."

"Honey, I'm so sorry."

"Don't be like that, Terri." She was afraid she'd cry again, but she was too worried to feel sorry for herself. "I don't love him at all any more. I just wish he'd quit saying things to hurt me." She finished with an edge of fear in her voice, "And I wish I knew what he was planning."

In the afternoon Mr. Riverton said that he'd noticed she was distracted, and wondered if she needed some time off.

Louella said yes, she might, and in fact her husband had mentioned that she might want to take the following day out. She'd been going to ask, but she wasn't sure—

Mr. Riverton said, smiling, "Sounds like he's planning a surprise."

"It does, doesn't it?" she said almost calmly.

Jim came home late. He was well-dressed, but his shirt had a wrinkle in it that bothered her, and she'd have adjusted his collar if she dared. "Any fires today?" he said. "Any explosions? Too many personal calls?"

She shook her head nervously.

He said, "Terrific. Did you buy everything?"

"It's in the car."

"Weren't you afraid it'd be stolen?" But he walked out and came back carrying two bags. Louella had always been impressed by how strong he was, and how confident.

Louella called downstairs after him, "Did you take five thousand dollars out of savings?"

The voice, from downstairs, sounded disturbingly hollow. "That would be smart. Gosh, do you know how many financial institutions are unsound?"

She flinched and called, "Did you take that money out of our joint account?"

He didn't answer.

Shortly she heard the sound of digging in the basement, then running water. She shivered and made a fire in the fireplace.

An hour later, she called down, "How's it going?"

"Nearly ready to pour," he answered. "Still, I'd hate to do a half-assed job. Don't you want to check the hole?"

"Thanks." She blushed, realizing that he was being sarcastic. She took a towel with her.

She edged around the hole in the floor and looked at the mound of dirt. The hole was deep and black; the hanging bulb barely cast light into it. All the other basement lights were turned off.

Six feet away from her, at the far end of the hole, Jim stood leaning on his shovel. Three tubs of ready-mix concrete stood beside him.

He smiled. "Deep enough?"

She moved even farther away, going to the freezer. "How deep does it have to be?"

"Depends." He looked at ease, confident. Jim was at his best with tools, at his worst with reassurance and safety checks and all the things she needed so desperately.

She took the ice mold out and tapped it sharply against the edge of the freezer. The ice block popped free. She swaddled it in the towel. "Maybe I should go upstairs now."

"I think you should come look at the hole."

She edged toward the hole, cradling the ice block to her chest as though it weren't cold at all. "Please."

But he only said, "Come over here."

She moved slowly and uncertainly all the way around the hole, careful not to get dirt or concrete dust on her shoes. She was starting to tremble. "Why do you make me do things like this? You know it makes me nervous."

His smile was broader, even more confident. "Why should I care what makes you nervous? How much longer do you think we'll be around each other, Louella?"

He was standing next to her, his right hand gripping the shovel. His left arm brushed her, and she felt sick. "Please don't talk like that."

"You certainly are polite. You say 'please' a lot, don't you? That and 'I'm sorry.'"

"I'm sorry," she said, and bit her tongue. "I can't help it." She started to shake.

He looked at her with mock concern. "Are you cold? Would you like to go somewhere else?"

"Oh, yes," she said, gasping. "Please—I mean, yes." She added, "Is it cold here because of that?" She pointed into the hole.

He looked where she pointed as she lost her balance and grabbed at him. He swore as he stumbled into the hole—

And looked blankly up as Louella smashed the edge of the ice into his temple. He dropped neatly onto his back.

Louella sprinkled lime over the body and shoveled the dirt back in, then poured and smoothed the concrete.

She put the ice block in the kitchen sink and left hot water running over it. It was half gone before she left the kitchen.

The five thousand dollars was in his bureau drawer. She put the money in the fire and knelt by it, drinking a glass of wine shakily and reading her master list. The last items on it, half of them crossed off, were:

Talk about bank failures, get J. to take out money.

Go to bank. Show you don't know about withdrawal.

Convince J. to repair crack in basement floor, dig deep.

Get shopping list (lime, concrete) in his handwriting.

Show list to someone. Save list.

Convince T. that you think J. may be up to something.

Convince T. that J. is seeing another woman.

Freeze ice mold.

Call T. and admit that J. is gone.

In a few days, she'd give in to Terri's urgings and call the police. They'd be sympathetic, but sure he'd run out.

She picked up the phone to call Terri, hung up when she realized it was too soon, then went downstairs to check the concrete.

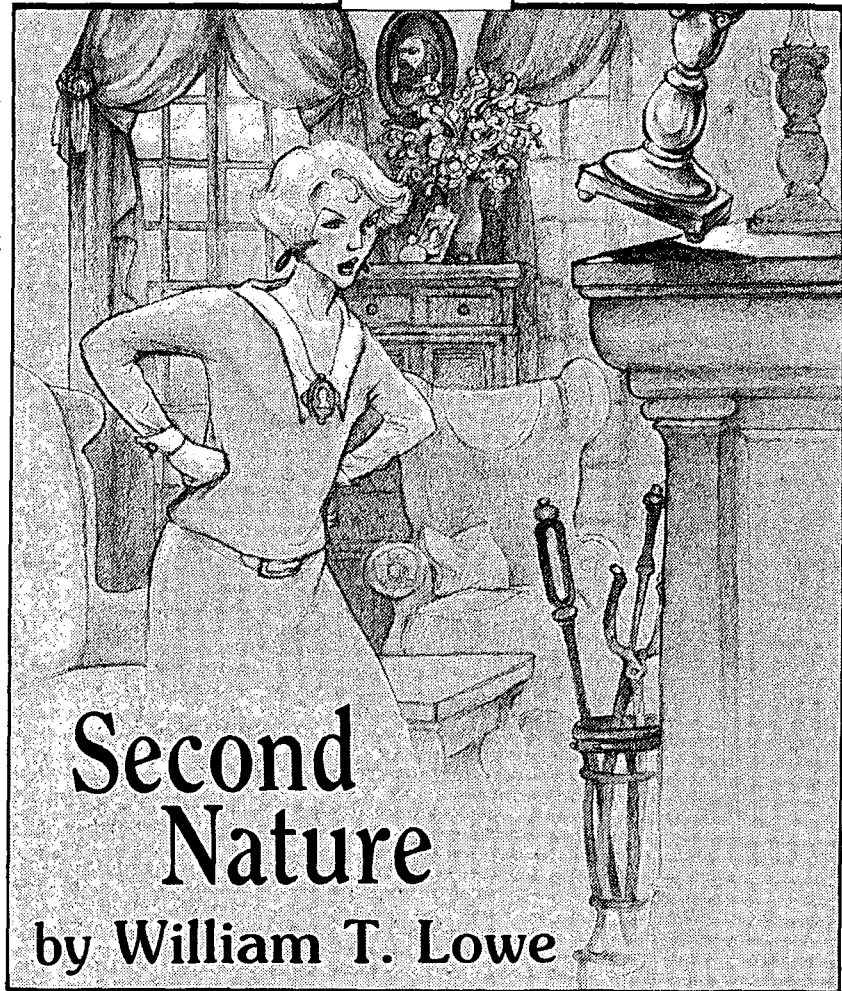
The mortgage was no problem. She'd done the figures several times; with scrimping, she could easily keep up payments until he was legally dead.

A year from now, she'd have a raised floor laid in the basement. She sipped some wine, debating over parquet versus linoleum, but it all reminded her of the concrete. She went downstairs to check it again.

Of course she'd be nervous that she'd be found out. But she was nervous already, and at least now she was alone.

In the bathroom, Louella looked in the mirror and whispered savagely, "Now you know what I'm good for."

She went downstairs, for the third of many thousand times, to check the drying concrete.



Second Nature

by William T. Lowe

Old habits are hard to break, even when a person has been dead for fifty years. When I was in service at Mimosa Hall, one of my duties was to answer the door. Sometimes I forget that I am not to do that now; it does frighten people to see the big door swing open by itself. Now Miss Polly herself or Martha from the kitchen will answer the door while I just look on.

But today I was in the front hall when the knock came, and I

simply forgot what I am. I opened the door. The man who stood there, gaping at the empty hallway, was Mr. Clayburn come again to call on Miss Polly. I remembered not to take his hat; that had been another old habit.

Miss Polly came hurrying into the hall from the parlor. "Why, Mr. Clayburn, how nice to see you!" She was all smiles and dressed for company. She took his hat and put it on a small table and led her guest into the parlor. Of course he couldn't know I followed them.

Miss Polly had set out the best china for tea. I would have used the everyday service; I didn't care for Mr. Emmett Clayburn. He was too much a dandy, with his plastered hair and fancy suit and hightop shoes. He was the latest suitor to come calling on Miss Polly. Now he sat by the fire, smirking and drinking tea.

"You poor thing," he was saying. "Caring for a big estate like this must be dreadfully tiresome for you."

Miss Polly smiled and dimpled. "A person must do what is required," she said. Slender, with her mother's blonde hair and blue eyes and firm chin, Miss Polly was well past thirty but she still looked like a schoolgirl. And acted like a schoolgirl, in my opinion. Mr. Emmett Clayburn was as transparent as well water.

Of course he knew about Mimosa Hall and our five hundred acres of farmland and timber. Anybody in town could have told him that the Pollards were one of the richest families in this part of Virginia, and that Miss Polly lived here alone, since her brother had been killed overseas.

"I always say that men have a natural aptitude for agricultural management," he was saying. "Don't you agree, Miss Polly?" He took a sharp look at her rings and the big brooch she always wore.

"More tea, Mr. Clayburn? Another of these little cakes?"

He managed to touch her arm as she poured him more tea and gave her what he thought was a warm smile. He looks like a fox circling a henhouse, I thought.

"I do believe Martha has some chocolates in the pantry," Miss Polly said. "I'll just go and fetch them."

When she left the room, he got to his feet. First to the mantel where he inspected the signature on the Sargent hanging there. Then he lifted all the silver pieces to look for the sterling hallmarks. Then he went around the room looking at the other paintings, fingering the rugs on the floor, appraising everything in sight. Of course he thought he was alone.

Miss Polly and I have an understanding. She knows what I am and that I belong here. She knows that cats and dogs and other animals are afraid of me. She has made it plain that I am not to annoy anyone, except of course when there might be a burglar or a prowler, and I am not to interfere with the way she runs the house. She doesn't understand that I feel responsible for her just as I did for her mother. Sometimes, not often, I take some liberties with my position.

I did now. Miss Polly might enjoy the company of Mr. Emmett Clayburn, but to me he was nothing but a fortune hunter. This would have to be his last visit.

I began by making the room darker. He glanced about nervously and retreated to his chair by the fire. The air around him became quite chilly. He leaned toward the fire and held out his hands.

The fire went out. Slowly at first, then it died down quickly until there were only a few embers glowing on the hearth. He reached for his cup; it glided away from his hand. I knew from his expression that he was recalling the gossip that Mimosa Hall was haunted.

An ominous creaking from across the room made him jump. He looked over his shoulder to see the door to the front hall opening slowly. Then the set of fireplace tools rattled, and he jerked around to see the poker rise into the air and hover over his head. He cowered in his chair, his face white, the hair on his neck rising.

A few more minutes of the dark and the cold and the dancing poker would send him pelting out the door, and that would be the last we would see of Mr. Emmett Clayburn.

But I heard Miss Polly's step in the hall from the pantry. I brightened the room and sent the poker back to its bracket. When she came in with a plate of candies, the fire was crackling again. She stared at her visitor's pasty face.

"Why, Mr. Clayburn, is something the matter?"

He gulped twice before he could speak. "Why, no, Miss Polly," he stammered. "I've just remembered an urgent appointment." He launched himself out of the chair and made for the door. "You will excuse me."

"Of course, Mr. Clayburn." Miss Polly frowned at the mantel above the fireplace. But like her mother, she was a good hostess.

"I have enjoyed your visit," she began, but he was already at the front door. I couldn't let him forget his hat; it rose from the table and settled gently on his head. He squeaked and was through the door and gone.

I was afraid Miss Polly would be angry, and she was. She stamped her foot and glared around the hall.

"Jonathan," she said in her most severe tone, "in the parlor. Right now."

She marched back inside and stood before the mantel. She frowned at the two silver candlesticks on the mantelpiece. "All right, Jonathan. You did it again. I know you're in here. Answer me."

The candlestick on the right tilted once, then settled back. That meant I said "yes." Tilting the left candlestick meant "no." Tilting both of them meant "maybe" or "I don't know." Communication had always been a problem, and the candlesticks were all we had. Her mother had told Miss Polly about them when Miss Polly was grown up enough to accept my being there. She also explained that in my day servants were not expected to read and write.

"I know you scared off Mr. Clayburn, Jonathan," Miss Polly said sternly. "I didn't see you do it, but I know you were up to your tricks again, weren't you?"

I couldn't deny it. The right candlestick moved gently, meekly. "Yes."

"That's the third gentleman caller you've run off this year!" She glared at the mantel and stamped her foot. "Explain yourself, Jonathan." She stamped her foot again. "Oh, I know you can't tell me that. You just decided you didn't like him. Is that it?"

Both candlesticks tilted toward each other. I thought a "maybe" was better than a "no."

"You don't think he was good enough for me?"

Right candlestick. "Yes."

"You think he just wanted to get his hands on my money?"

The right candlestick bounced into the air. "Yes."

"Well, maybe you're right. I didn't like him much myself."

The right candlestick spun in the air and dropped back into place.

"But, Jonathan, do you think I want to be an old maid all my life?"

"No."

Just like her mother, Miss Polly never stayed angry very long. Usually she began to giggle at the notion of standing by the fire in an empty room talking to the mantel. As always, I had to be sure Martha didn't come in from the kitchen and hear her, or see the candlesticks moving. She would have been frightened out of her wits, and good help is still hard to get.

"Oh, Jonathan," Miss Polly said, "I know you mean well." She stared into the fire. "But will I ever meet someone we both like?"

I can't foretell the future any better than a living person, but of this I was sure. The right candlestick sprang off the mantel and flew around the room, turning cartwheels, diving under tables, brushing the ceiling over her head.

Miss Polly laughed. "All right, Jonathan. That's a promise." She started out to the kitchen, but at the door she turned back. "But next time, let me make up my own mind. You hear me?" All the Pollard women have to have the last word.

Miss Polly was my favorite. It was she who had years ago found out what my name was. With the candlesticks we were on speaking terms, although she still turned pale sometimes when she caught me dusting the furniture. One day she took the family Bible off the table where it was always kept and opened it. "Who exactly are you?" she demanded.

I turned to the correct page and made a teaspoon hover over one line.

"Anson Pollard," she read. "Died May 14, 1872." She looked around the room. "Are you my Great-uncle Anson?"

The teaspoon waggled and pointed to a smaller line below that one.

"He and his faithful servant Jonathan killed by lightning during a storm." She looked up from the page. "Jonathan? You are Jonathan?"

"Yes," said the teaspoon.

"If you're here, where is Uncle Anson?"

The teaspoon pointed at the floor.

"Down there? Oh, dear." She was quiet for a moment. "Well, Jonathan," she said stoutly, "I'm sure you served the family very well." I am proud to say that I did, and I've been serving the family ever since.

Maybe this time I tried too hard to be helpful because a few days later I almost got Miss Polly arrested for horse stealing.

That would have been the talk of the county and a family disgrace. There are the new automobiles now, but horse stealing is still a very serious offense. When the sheriff came, I let Miss Polly answer the door herself. I remembered the sheriff as one of the Culpepper children who used to raid the Pollard orchard many years ago; now he was an embarrassed old man, twisting his hat in his hands.

He refused Miss Polly's invitation to step inside. "I'm afraid I'm here on business, Miss Polly," he said.

"Yes, Sheriff Culpepper?"

"It's about that new neighbor of yours down the road: Mr. James Howell, who bought the old Simpson place?"

"I've heard about him. We've never met."

"Well, he's raising thoroughbred horses, those Morgan horses, and it seems one of his mares is missing. A right prize animal, he says."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but what has it to do with me?"

The sheriff's face was as red as a brick. "Well, Miss Polly, it seems that one of Mr. Howell's hands done seen that mare in the corral outside your stable."

"Outside my stable? Well, surely the horse must have just wandered in there."

The sheriff twisted his hat completely out of shape. "No, ma'am. It seems that the gate is latched on the outside. With Mr. Howell's mare on the inside."

Miss Polly stared at him. "You mean . . . you mean . . ." She drew herself up and stamped her foot. Just like her mother, I thought. "Sheriff, if you think for one minute that I stole that horse! Well, I never!"

"No, not at all, Miss Polly. There's got to be some mistake. I mean, what would you folks at Mimosa Hall want with another horse?"

Miss Polly had heard enough. "Yes, there most certainly is a mistake. If Mr. Howell thinks I am harboring an animal of his, then let Mr. Howell come here and tell me so himself. Good afternoon, Sheriff Culpepper!"

He left quickly. Miss Polly closed the front door firmly and marched into the parlor. "Jonathan," she said, "are you here?"

The right candlestick said, "Yes."

"Is there a strange horse in our pen?"

The left candlestick said, "No."

"This whole thing is a mistake?"

"Yes."

"All right. I'm sure the sheriff can straighten it out. Tell Martha we'll have roast pork for dinner. Oh, never mind. I'll tell her."

In my second existence I have learned what I think is known as discretion. The candlesticks answer questions. They don't always tell the truth.

That evening I waited in the front hall, hoping we would have another visitor. Since Martha always leaves before sundown, Miss Polly would have to answer the door herself. When the knock came at the door, she came down the hall from the kitchen, wearing an apron with a frown on her face and a smudge on her cheek.

She opened the door and stared at the man standing there, a tall, handsome man wearing casual work clothes. He smiled politely and took off his hat.

"Miss Pollard? Good evening. My name is James Howell."

"Yes?" Then Miss Polly recognized the name. "Oh, Mr. Howell. You bought the Simpson place. You're the man who is raising horses."

"Yes, Miss Pollard. May I come in?"

Miss Polly was flustered, and I knew why. She hadn't expected a caller, the fire hadn't been lit in the parlor, neither tea nor coffee was ready, and, even worse, she was wearing an apron. And this was the man who thought she had taken one of his horses.

But she was the lady of the house and she knew her manners. "Do come in, Mr. Howell," she said graciously. Her mother would have been proud of her.

From there on things went smoothly. Miss Polly led him into the parlor, saying, "I'm afraid we weren't expecting company." But when she opened the door she saw that lamps had been lit in corners of the room and a cheery fire was blazing in the fireplace. She shot a look at the mantel, but said nothing. She motioned her guest to one of the chairs by the fire. "Please have a seat."

James Howell walked over to the fireplace, and when his back was turned Miss Polly's apron whisked itself away and vanished under a seat cushion. There was a light touch on her face as the smudge disappeared from her cheek. She put her hand to her face and looked again at the mantel.

From the pantry came the whistle of a teakettle on the boil. Mr. Howell looked at the table on which the good tea service stood waiting. "Do I hear a teapot calling?" he asked pleasantly.

"Why, yes," Miss Polly stammered. "Would you care for a cup?"

"Thank you, if it's not too much trouble."

In the pantry Miss Polly found a plate of sliced fruit cake ready and waiting. "Jonathan, what in the world are you doing?" she whispered. Of course there was no answer. She poured hot water into the teapot and carried it and the plate of cake back to the parlor.

When they were settled by the fire and Mr. Howell had sampled his tea, he glanced around the room. "What a charming home, Miss Pollard. I wish I had come calling sooner. But there's been so much to do since I moved here. I live alone, you know, and I have to supervise all the work."

Miss Polly came directly to the point. "But now I assume you've come to inquire about your horse?" she asked sweetly.

"Now that you mention it. May I call you Miss Polly?"

In spite of herself, she smiled and the dimples appeared in her cheeks. "Please do, Mr. Howell."

"James, please."

He stretched out his legs and leaned back. "I don't have to inquire about Rose, Miss Polly. I know she's in good hands. I saw her out back before I knocked at your front door."

"So she is here." Miss Polly glared at the mantel where the candlesticks stood silent and still. To Mr. Howell she said, "And how did you know where to find her, Mr. Howell?"

"James, please. Actually, I followed the same trail Rose did when she came here. It led me right to your stable door."

"I don't understand." The firelight made golden highlights in her hair; James Howell looked at it with appreciation. "I thought the horse just wandered in here," Miss Polly said. "You followed a trail?"

"Yes. A trail of grain. There was a trail of grain from my pasture up the road and down your lane and into your stable yard. Rose loves grain, naturally, and when she found my own gate open, she just followed it."

"A trail of grain? But how in the world . . ."

It was then I made a mistake, a very bad mistake. Just when everything was going so well. Here was this handsome new neighbor, a man who lived alone, a man who had resources enough to raise horses and employ workers, sitting by a cosy fire in our parlor. Here he was with Miss Polly and they were smiling at each other. And their teacups were empty.

Old habits are hard to break, especially when a person spends a lifetime in household service and takes pride in his work. It was still second nature to me to answer the door, to tend the fires, to dust, to wait on the table, to fill water and wine glasses. And teacups.

The teapot lifted itself off the table and floated through the air toward our guest. It deftly poured more tea into his cup and then

sailed across the hearth and filled Miss Polly's cup and went back to the table.

It was a terrible mistake because both of them saw it happen. Miss Polly gasped. "Jonathan!" she hissed at the fireplace. "Be careful!" Her eyes were wide with alarm as she turned to our guest.

"Now don't be alarmed, James," she said. "I know you must have been startled, but you mustn't be frightened. It's nothing to be afraid of. . . ."

He held up his hand and smiled at her. I was pleased to see that it was a genuine, unafraid smile. "Don't upset yourself, Miss Polly." He looked around the room and in spite of myself I ducked behind a loveseat.

"Jonathan, is it?" he said. "Do you know, Miss Polly, I have someone who looks after me, too." He grinned at the incredulous look on her face. "Yes, I do. Old Miss Fanny Simpson still, ah, still resides on the farm I bought." He saw relief dawning on Miss Polly's face.

"Yes, she does. Miss Fanny passed away at the turn of the century, but she's still there. She looks after me when she thinks I need it."

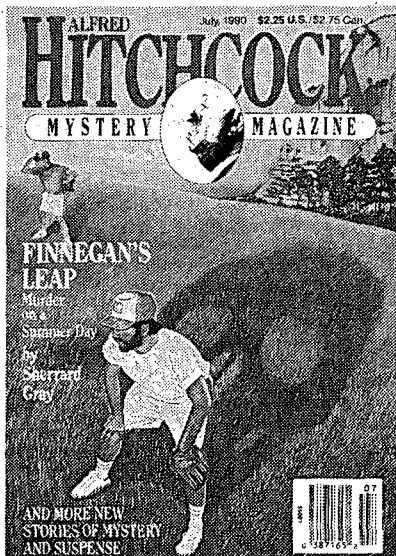
After a moment Miss Polly began to smile and then they were both laughing. He held out his hand and Miss Polly took it. I suppose sharing a secret will bring two people together.

A bit later Miss Polly murmured, "I guess we'll never know who put out that trail of grain, will we?"

The candlestick on the right hopped into the air, but neither of them noticed. Slowly it sank back to its place on the mantel. It didn't matter if they ever knew or not.

I knew.

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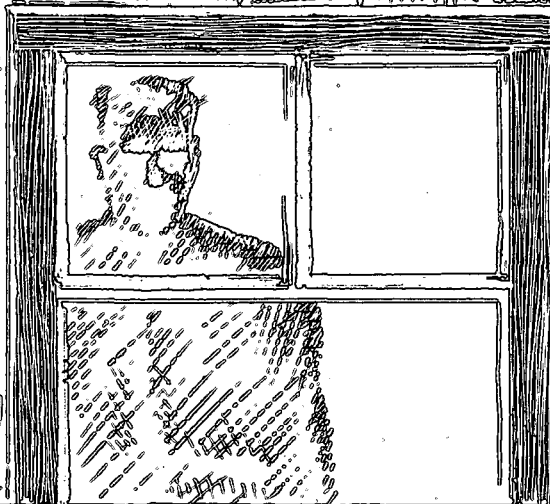
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FICTION

Front Window

by Dan Crawford



Was it really such a wild, wonderful idea to work out of the apartment? Sure, the rent on that cubicle downtown was enough to fund a revolution, but at least moving from this cubicle to that one meant that he got out twice a day. Now, unless for some reason a client wanted to see Russ personally, he hardly left the place at all, except to get the mail or groceries. And since the mailroom and a convenience store were on the first floor, neither errand involved leaving the building.

Russ set his elbows on his drawing board, letting his eyes stray from the work to be done across the brief floor to the short wall. The furnished studio apartment was quite appropriate to someone just getting started in freelance work, but it was hardly conducive to the great vision Russ expected of himself as an artist. The only great vision required by this apartment came in trying to visualize what all that rent money was paying for. The postage stamp rug, maybe, and the furniture all scaled to the size of the floor, so that the place would look huge in the brochures. That end table, for example, was just about big enough to carry one coaster; the couch might be long enough for one person with his knees bent

and one cat. It sufficed for Russ (he didn't even have a cat), but mere sufficiency was no source of satisfaction.

He glanced at the tiny, tiny balcony that might have done for potted plants if Russ had had any inclination to own potted plants, and then looked down at his watch. It was just about time: excitement at last.

The residents of those top floor apartments in the building across the street didn't know they were not only Russ's models but his afternoon's entertainment. He would no more have missed the little dramas on those four channels than the most devoted fan would have skipped an episode of an afternoon soap.

In his mind, he had the windows labeled, left to right, A, B, C, and D. Each opened into just such a puny studio as Russ could see around him, but each had its own special filling, its own character.

There she was. B always came home first. She tossed her jacket onto a tiny chair, whipping around to lock the door in the same movement, so fast that the black ponytail whipped around and flailed at her cheek. She was some kind of waitress or hostess; that was a uniform she had on, but presumably the logo of the restaurant was on some little cap or beanie that

she would certainly take off before getting on the bus.

She looked flushed, annoyed; trouble at work or on the bus, or maybe bad news in the mail. There wasn't much of that, tossed down on the table next to the chair. She put both hands up behind her back to unzip the uniform. Russ turned to the next window where C was just unlocking the door.

C was a blond bachelor with a broad chest and cleft chin. He tossed off his jacket, too, on walking into the room, and was loosening his tie with one hand as he reached for the phone with the other. He plopped into a chair with its back to the window, punching in a phone number and unbuttoning his shirt at the same time.

Did they know each other, B and C? Did they meet in the hall Russ couldn't see and wave or greet each other more warmly? It seemed inevitable, really, from this side of the street as Russ watched them moving around in their underwear, bare yards from each other.

B turned toward her phone, dread spreading across her face. Russ felt like that himself, most days, when that annoying bell broke into his concentration.

She lifted the phone and said something. Her face brightened. Russ looked from B to C

and back again. Were they talking to each other, or was this a pair of independent conversations? He tried to synchronize their movements, but it wasn't easy to judge when C was talking, just by the bobbing of his head.

Meanwhile, the A's were home. She came through the door first and then he came in carrying the baby, who was asleep. They had probably caught him during a nap at the day care center. Tenderness was mixed with sorrow as they took him to the crib in the corner of the room. Russ had never seen any sign of anything wrong with the baby, so it might just be they regretted having to leave him somewhere else during the day. The lines in their faces, which should have been much younger, made them low level executives, each trying to work up to some point where one or the other could stay home.

Ah, B had hung up and was turning toward the little refrigerator. She wasn't going out, then.

Mrs. A was telling Mr. A about her day. He nodded, but it was just to mark time as he waited his turn to tell about his day.

C had hung up, too, and was punching the dial for a second call.

And here was D home, a glowering older woman looking for all the world like his second grade teacher. He expected she was a teacher, a year or two from retirement, without any savings. Scratching for a little cash to live on in one's old age would make anyone glower. She did seem to be very good at it, though; glowering, that is.

A sleek black cat jumped up on the back of a chair to greet her. At the sight of her familiar, she smiled.

B was sitting down at the kitchen table, still wearing her slip, and kicked off those black pumps. She took the rubber band from her hair and shook the ponytail free.

The A's were hugging. D was stroking the cat.

When these people came home, they could relax. Russ was never more than twenty

feet from his work, unless he left the apartment. A, B, C, and D, though, could let the demands of the day fall from them; they were home now, safe and secure from the world in their little nests.

Russ reached behind his chair for the rifle. He didn't hesitate, closing one eye and setting the other to the sight. The baby first, a tricky shot, with that crib. Then his parents. Then B, whipping around to see what the noise was, and D, with the cat jumping out of reach, and finally C, right between the eyes as he came to the window.

Russ looked up and down the row of windows, and set the gun gently on the floor. Tomorrow, he told himself, or the next day at the very latest, he'd try to find some bullets. C hung up and started to push a third number.

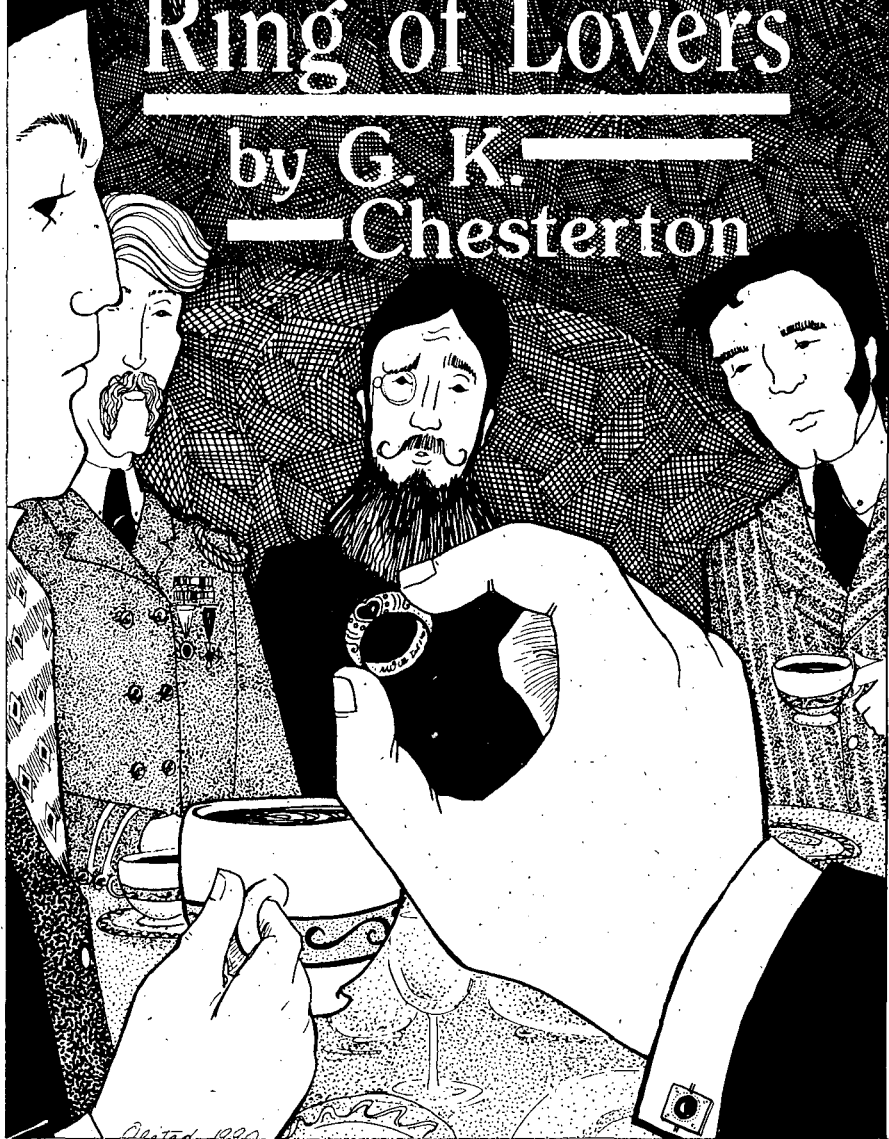
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MYSTERY CLASSIC

Ring of Lovers

by G. K.
— Chesterton



“As I said before,” observed Mr. Pond, towards the end of one of his lucid but rather lengthy speeches, “our friend Gahagan here is a very truthful man and tells wanton and unnecessary lies. But this very truthfulness—”

Captain Gahagan waved a gloved hand as in courteous acknowledgment of anything anybody liked to say; he had an especially flamboyant flower in his coat and looked unusually gay. But Sir Hubert Wotton, the third party at the little conference, sat up. For he followed the flow of words with tireless, intelligent attention, while Gahagan, though radiant, seemed rather abstracted; and these abrupt absurdities always brought Sir Hubert up standing.

“Say that again,” he said, not without sarcasm.

“Surely that is obvious enough,” pleaded Mr. Pond. “A real liar does not tell wanton and unnecessary lies. He tells wise and necessary lies. It was not necessary for Gahagan to tell us once that he had seen not one sea serpent but six sea serpents, each larger than the last; still less to inform us that each reptile in turn swallowed the last one whole; and that the last of all was opening its mouth to swallow the ship, when he saw it was only a yawn after too heavy a meal, and the monster suddenly went to sleep. I will not dwell on the mathematical symmetry with which snake within snake yawned, and snake within snake went to sleep, all except the smallest, which had no dinner and walked out to look for some. It was not, I say, necessary for Gahagan to tell this story. It was hardly even wise. It is very unlikely that it would promote his worldly prospects or gain him any rewards or decorations for scientific research. The official scientific world, I know not why, is prejudiced against any story even of one sea serpent, and would be the less likely to accept the narrative in its present form.

“Or again, when Captain Gahagan told us he had been a Broad Church missionary, and had readily preached in the pulpits of nonconformists, then in the mosques of Moslems, then in the monasteries of Tibet, but was most warmly welcomed by a mystical sect of theists in those parts, people in a state of supreme spiritual exaltation who worshiped him like a god, until he found they were enthusiasts for human sacrifice and he was the victim. This statement was also quite unnecessary. To have been a latitudinarian clergyman is but little likely to advance him in his present profession, or to fit him for his present pursuits. I suspect the story was partially a parable or allegory. But anyhow, it was quite unnecessary and it was obviously untrue. And when a thing is obviously

untrue, it is obviously not a lie."

"Suppose," said Gahagan abruptly, "suppose I were to tell you a story that really is true?"

"I should regard it with great suspicion," said Wotton grimly.

"You mean you would think I was still romancing. But why?"

"Because it would be so very like a romance," retorted Wotton.

"But don't you think," asked the captain thoughtfully, "that real life sometimes is like a romance?"

"I think," replied Wotton, with certain genuine shrewdness that lay very deep in him, "that I could always really tell the difference."

"You are right," said Pond, "and it seems to me the difference is this. Life is artistic in parts, but not as a whole; it's like broken bits of different works of art. When everything hangs together, and it all fits in, we doubt. I might even believe that Gahagan saw six sea serpents; but not that each was larger than the last. If he'd said there was first a large one and then a little one and then a larger one, he might have taken us in. We often say that one social situation is like being in a novel, but it doesn't finish like the novel—at least, not the same novel."

"Pond," said Gahagan, "I sometimes think you are inspired, or possessed of a devil in a quiet way. It's queer you should say that, because my experience was just like that. With this difference: each familiar melodrama broke off, but only turned to blacker melodrama—or tragedy. Again and again, in this affair, I thought I was in a magazine story, and then it turned to quite another story. Sort of dissolving view, or a nightmare. Especially a nightmare."

"And why especially?" asked Wotton.

"It's a horrible story," said Gahagan, lowering his voice. "But it's not so horrible now."

"Of course," said Mr. Pond, nodding. "You are happy and wish to tell us a horrible story."

"And what does *that* mean?" demanded Wotton.

"It means," said Gahagan, "that I got engaged to be married this morning."

"The devil you—I beg your pardon," said Wotton, very red in the face. "Congratulations, of course, and all that. But what has it to do with the nightmare?"

"There is a connection," said Gahagan dreamily. "But you want the horrible story and not the happy one. Well, it was a bit of a mystery, at least to me; but I understood it at last."

"And when you've done mystifying us, you will tell us the solution?"

"No, Pond will tell you the solution," said Gahagan maliciously. "He's already puffed up because he guessed the kind of story, before he even heard it. If he can't finish the story, when he has heard it—" He broke off and then resumed more solidly:

"It began with a dinner party, what they call a stag party, given by Lord Crome, following on a cocktail party mostly given by Lady Crome. Lady Crome was a tall and swift and graceful person with a small dark head. Lord Crome was quite the reverse; he was in every way, physical and mental, a 'long-headed' person. You've heard of a hatchet face; his was a hatchet that cut off his own head—or rather his own body, abolishing the slighter and more insignificant figure. He is an economist and he gave one the impression of being *distract* and rather bored with all the ladies who swam about in the wake of his wonderful wife, that darting swan; and perhaps that was why he wanted the cooler society of his own sex. Anyhow, he kept some of his male guests for a little dinner after the at-home was over. I happened to be one of them; but in spite of that, it was a select company.

"It was a select company, and yet it hardly seemed to have been selected. They were mostly well-known men, and yet it looked as if Crome had taken their names out of a hat. The first person I ran into was Captain Blande, supposed to be one of the biggest officers in the British army, and I should think the stupidest, for any strategic purposes. Of course he looks magnificent—like a chryselephantine statue of Hercules, and about as useful in time of war. I once used the word 'chryselephantine,' meaning gold and ivory; and he thought I was calling him elephantine. Classical education of the *pukka sahib*. Well, the man he was put next to was Count Kranz, the Hungarian scientist and social reformer. He speaks twenty-seven languages, including philosophic language. I wonder what language he talked to Captain Blande in. Just beyond the count was another fellow more of Blande's sort but darker and leaner and livelier, a fellow called Wooster of some Bengal regiment. His language also would be limited: the Latin verb *polo*, *polas*, *polat*; I play polo, thou playest polo, he plays polo, or (more devastatingly) he does not play polo. But just as polo itself was an Asiatic game, and can be traced through the gilded jungle of Persian and Indian illuminations, so there was something faintly Eurasian about this man Wooster; he was like a dark-striped tiger and

one could fancy him gliding through a jungle. That pair at least looked a little more well-matched; for Kranz also was dark and goodlooking, with arched black Assyrian eyebrows and a long dark beard, spreading like a fan or the forked tail of a bird. I sat next, and got on with Wooster pretty well; on the other side of me was Sir Oscar Marvell, the great actor-manager, all very fine and large, with the Olympian curls and the Roman nose. Here also there was some lack of rapport. Sir Oscar Marvell didn't want to talk about anything but Sir Oscar Marvell; and the other men didn't want to talk about Sir Oscar Marvell at all. The three remaining men were the new under-secretary for Foreign Affairs, Pitt-Palmer, a very frigid-looking young man like the bust of Augustus Caesar—and indeed *he* was classical enough, and could have quoted the classics all right; one Italian singer, whose name I could not remember, and one Polish diplomat, whose name nobody could remember. And I was saying to myself all the time: 'What a funny collection!'

"I know this story," said Wotton positively. "A humorous host collects a lot of incompatible people for the pleasure of hearing them quarrel. Done very well in one of Anthony Berkeley's detective stories."

"No," replied Gahagan. "I think their incompatibility was quite accidental, and I know that Crome didn't use it to make them quarrel. As a matter of fact, he was a most tactful host, and it would be truer to say he prevented them from quarreling. He did it rather cleverly, too, by beginning to talk about heirlooms and family jewels and so on. Different as they were, most of them were well off, and what is called of a good family; and it was about as close to common ground as they could get. The Pole, who was a baldish but graceful person, with very charming manners, and much the wittiest man at table, was giving an amusing account of the adventures of a medal of Sobeiski when it fell into the hands first of a Jew, and then of a Prussian, and then of a Cossack. In contrast to the Pole, who was hairless and talkative, the Italian beyond him was silent, and rather sulky, under his bush of black hair.

"That's an interesting-looking ring you are wearing yourself, Lord Crome," said the Pole politely. "Those heavy rings are generally historic. I think I should really like to wear an episcopal ring or, better still, a papal ring. But then there are all those tiresome preliminaries about being made pope; it involves celibacy; and I—" And he shrugged his shoulders.

"Very annoying, no doubt," said Lord Crome, smiling at him grimly. "As for this ring here—well, it is rather interesting in a way, in that sort of family way, of course. I don't know the details, but it is obviously sixteenth century. Care to look at it?" And he slipped off his finger a heavy ring with a red stone and passed it to the Pole, who was sitting next to him. It proved on examination to be set with a cluster of extremely fine rubies and carved with a central device of a heart inside a rose. I saw it myself, since it was handed round the table; and there was some lettering in old French which meant something like 'From the lover only and only to the beloved.'

"A romance in your family history, I suppose?" suggested the Hungarian count. "And about the sixteenth century. But you do not know the story?"

"No," said Crome, "but I suppose it was, as you say, a romance in the family."

"They began talking about sixteenth century romances, at some length, and at last Crome asked very courteously if everybody had seen the ring."

"Oh," cried Wotton, with a deep breath, rather like a schoolboy at a conjurer's performance. "I know *this* story, anyhow. This is a magazine story, if you like! The ring wasn't returned and everybody was searched or somebody refused to be searched; and there was some awfully romantic reason for his refusing to be searched."

"You are right," said Gahagan. "Right, up to a point. The ring was not returned. We were all searched. We all insisted on being searched. Nobody refused to be searched. But the ring was gone."

Gahagan turned rather restlessly and threw an elbow over the back of his chair; after a moment he went on.

"Please don't imagine I didn't feel all you say; that we seemed to have got inside a novel; and not a very novel sort of novel. But the difference was exactly what Pond says: that the novel didn't finish properly, but seemed to go on to something else. We had just reached about the coffee stage of the dinner, while this fuss about the first discovery of the loss was being discussed. But all the nonsense about searching was really very swift and simple; and the coffee hadn't even got cold in the interlude, though Crome offered to send for some more. We all said that of course it didn't matter, but Crome summoned the butler who'd been handing it round and they whispered together in what was obviously a rather agitated conversation. Then, just as Pitt-Palmer was lifting his

coffee cup to his lips, Lord Crome sprang up stiff and bristling and called out like the crack of a whip:

"Gentlemen, do not touch this coffee. It is poisoned."

"But dash it all," interrupted Wotton, "that's a different story! I say, Gahagan, are you sure you didn't dream all this? After reading through a stack of out-of-date magazines and mixing up all the results? Of course we know the story about a whole company laid out with poison—"

"The results in this case were rather more extraordinary," said Gahagan calmly. "Most of us naturally sat like stone statues under such a thunderbolt of a threat. But young Pitt-Palmer, with his cold, clean-cut, classical face, rose to his feet with the coffee cup in his hand and said in the coolest way:

"Awfully sorry; but I do hate letting my coffee get cold."

"And he drained his cup; and as God sees me, his face turned black or a blend of dreadful colors, and after horrible and inhuman noises, he fell down as in a fit before our eyes.

"Of course, we were not certain at first. But the Hungarian scientist had a doctor's degree; and what he reported was confirmed by the local doctor, who was sent for at once. There was no doubt that he was dead."

"You mean," said Wotton, "that the doctors agreed that he was poisoned?"

Gahagan shook his head and repeated: "I said they agreed that he was dead."

"But why should he be dead unless he was poisoned?"

"He was choked," said Gahagan; and for one instant a shudder caught his whole powerful frame.

After a silence, Wotton said at last:

"I don't understand a word you say. Who poisoned the coffee?"

"Nobody poisoned the coffee, because it wasn't poisoned," answered Gahagan. "The only reason for saying that was to make sure the coffee should remain in the cup, to be analyzed just as it was. Poor Pitt-Palmer had put in a very large lump of sugar just before; but the sugar would melt. Some things do not melt."

Sir Hubert Wotton stared for some seconds into vacancy, and then his eyes began to glow with his own very real though not very rapid intelligence.

"You mean," he said, "that Pitt-Palmer somehow dropped the ring into the black coffee, where it wouldn't be seen, before he was searched. In other words, Pitt-Palmer was the thief?"

"Pitt-Palmer is dead," said Gahagan very gravely, "and it is the more my duty to defend his memory. What he did was doubtless wrong, as I have come to see more clearly than I did, but not worse than many a man has done. You may say what you like about that very common sort of wrongdoing. But he was not a thief."

"Will you or will you not explain what all this means?" cried Wotton with abrupt annoyance.

"No," replied Gahagan, with a sudden air of relapsing into laziness and fatigue. "Mr. Pond will now oblige."

"Pond wasn't there, was he?" asked Wotton sharply.

"Oh, no," answered Gahagan, rather with the air of one about to go to sleep. "But I can see by his elbows that he knows all about it. Besides, it's somebody else's turn."

He closed his eyes with so hopeless a placidity that the baffled Wotton was forced to turn on the third party, rather like a bewildered bull.

"Do you really know anything about this?" he demanded. "What does he mean by saying that the man who hid the ring wasn't a thief?"

"Well, perhaps I can guess a little," said Mr. Pond modestly. "But that's only because I've kept in mind what we said at the beginning—about the misleading way in which real things remind us of romantic things, only they are never rounded off like the romance. You see, the trouble is that, when a real event reminds us of a novel, we unconsciously think we know all about it, because we know all about the novel. We have got into a groove or rut of familiar fiction; and we can't help thinking the groove runs forward and backward as it does in fiction. We've got the whole background of the story at the back of our minds, and we can't believe that we're really in another story. We always assume something that is assumed in the fictional story, and it isn't true. Once assume the wrong beginning, and you'll not only give the wrong answer but you ask the wrong question. In this case, you've got a mystery, but you've got hold of the wrong mystery."

"Gahagan said you would explain everything," said Wotton, with controlled satire. "May I ask if this is the explanation? Is this the solution or the mystery?"

"The real mystery of the ring," said Pond gravely, "is not where it went to, but where it came from."

Wotton stared at him steadily for an instant, and then said in rather a new voice, "Go on."

Mr. Pond went on. "Gahagan has said very truly that poor Pitt-Palmer was not the thief. Pitt-Palmer did not steal the ring."

"Then," exploded Wotton, "who the devil was it who stole the ring?"

"Lord Crome stole the ring," said Mr. Pond.

There was a silence upon the whole group for a brief space, and then the somnolent Gahagan stirred and said, "I knew you would see the point."

By way of making things clearer, Mr. Pond added almost apologetically:

"But you see, he had to hand it round, to find out whom he had stolen it from."

After a moment he resumed in his usual logical but laborious manner. "Don't you see, as I said, you assume something at the start, simply because it is in all the stories? You assume that when a host hands round something at dinner, it's something belonging to him and his household, probably an old family possession because that is in all the stories. But Lord Crome meant something much blacker and bitterer than that when he said, with a dreadful irony, that it commemorated a romance in his family.

"Lord Crome had stolen that ring by intercepting correspondence, or, in other words, tearing open an envelope addressed to his wife and containing nothing but the ring. The address was typewritten; nor indeed did he know all the handwritings involved. But he knew the very ancient writing engraved on that ring; which was such that it could only have been given with one purpose. He assembled those men to find out who was the sender, or, in other words, who was the owner. He knew the owner would somehow attempt to reclaim his possession, if he possibly could, to stop the scandal and remove the evidence. And indeed the man who did so, though he might be a blackguard, would certainly not be a thief. As a matter of fact, after a heathen fashion, he was a bit of a hero. Perhaps it was not for nothing that he had that cold, strong face that is the stone mask of Augustus. He took, first of all, the simple but sensible course of slipping the ring into his black coffee, under cover of a gesture of taking sugar. There it would not be seen, for the moment, anyhow, and he could safely offer himself to be searched. That demented moment, which really seemed to turn the whole thing into a frightful dream, when Crome screamed out that the coffee was poisoned, was only Crome's desperate counterstroke when he had guessed the trick, to make sure that the coffee should

be left alone and the ring recovered. But that young man with the cold face preferred to die in that dreadful fashion: by swallowing the heavy ring and choking, on the chance that his secret, or rather Lady Crome's secret, might yet be overlooked. It was a desperate chance, anyway, but of all the courses open to him, that being his object, it was probably the best he could have taken. In any case, I feel that we must all support Gahagan in saying, very properly, that the poor fellow's memory should be protected from any baser suggestions, and that a gentleman is certainly not a robber when he prefers to choke himself with his own ring."

Mr. Pond coughed delicately, having brought his argument to a close; and Sir Hubert Wotton remained staring at him, rather more bewildered by the solution than the problem. When he rose slowly to his feet, it was with the air of one shaking off something that was still an evil dream, even when he knew that it had happened.

"Well, I've got to be going, anyhow," he said, with an air of heavy relief. "Got to look in at Whitehall and I fancy I'm late already. By the way, if what you say is true, this must have happened very lately. So far as I know, the news of Pitt-Palmer's suicide hasn't come through yet—at least it hadn't come through this morning."

"It happened last night," said Gahagan, and rose from the chair where he had been sprawling, to take leave of his friend.

When Wotton had departed, a long silence fell upon the two other friends who remained looking gravely at each other.

"It happened last night," repeated Gahagan. "That is why I told you it had something to do with what happened this morning. I got engaged to Joan Varney this morning."

"Yes," said Mr. Pond gently. "I think I understand."

"Yes, I think you do," said Gahagan, "but I am going to try to explain, for all that. Do you know there was one thing almost more awful than that poor fellow's death? And it only hit me when I was half a mile from that accursed house. I knew why I had been one of the guests."

He was standing and staring out of the window, with his broad back turned to Pond; and after the last words he was silent and continued to stare at the stormy landscape outside. Perhaps something in it stirred another memory, for when he spoke again it was as if he started a new subject, though it was another aspect of the same one.

"I didn't tell you anything much about the sort of garden party, with cocktails, that they had that afternoon before the dinner, because I felt that until one realized the climax, one couldn't realize anything; it would all sound like vamping about the weather. But it was rather rum sort of weather yesterday, as it still is; only it was stormier, and I think the storm has passed over now. And it was a rum sort of atmosphere, too; though the weather was only a coincidence, of course, it does sometimes happen that meteorological conditions make men more conscious of moral conditions. There was a queer, lurid sort of sky over the garden, though there was a fair amount of fitful sunshine almost as capricious as lightning. A huge great mountain of cloud, colored like ink and indigo, was coming up behind the pale, pillared facade of the house, which was still in a wan flush of light; and I remember even then being chilled by a childish fancy that Pitt-Palmer was a pale marble statue and part of the building. But there was little else to give any hint of the secret; nobody could say that Lady Crome was like a statue, for she went flying and flaunting about like a bird of paradise. But, whether you believe it or not, I did from the first feel an oppression, both physical and psychical, especially psychical. It increased when we went indoors and the dining room curtains cut us off from any actual sight of the storm. They were old fashioned dark red curtains, with heavy gilded tassels; and it was as if everything was steeped in the same dye. You've heard of a man seeing red; well, what I saw was dark red. That's as near as I can get to the feeling, for it was a feeling from the first and I guessed nothing.

"And then that sinister and revolting thing happened before my eyes at the table; I can see the dark red wine in the port decanters and the dull glow of the lampshades. And still it seemed as if I were invisible and impersonal; I was hardly conscious of myself. Of course we all had to answer some questions about ourselves, but I need not tell you about the trail of official fussing that crossed the track of the tragedy. It did not take long, since it was so obviously a case of suicide, and the party broke up, straggling out into the stormy night through the garden. As they passed out, they seemed to have taken on new shapes, new outlines. Between the hot night and the horrible death and that foul fog of throttling hatred in which we had tried to breathe, I began to see something else about them, perhaps to see them as they were. They were no longer incongruous but grotesquely congruous; as in a hideous

camaraderie. Of course, this was a mood, and a morbid one; they really had been different enough, but they had something in common.

"I liked the Pole best; he had a sense of humor, and admirable manners, but I knew what he meant when he so courteously declined the position of pope, because it would involve celibacy. Crome knew it, too, and grinned back at him like a demon. The other one I liked was Major Wooster, the Anglo-Indian, but something told me that he was really of the jungle; a *shikar* not only hunting tigers, a tiger not only hunting deer. Then there was the titled doctor with the Assyrian brows and beard; I bet he was more Semitic than Magyar. But anyhow, he had his thick lips in his thick beard, and a look in his almond eyes that I did not like at all. One of the worst of them, I should say. I wouldn't say anything worse of Blande than that he's probably too stupid to understand anything but his own body. He hasn't enough mind to know that he has a mind. We all know Sir Oscar Marvell; I remember him marching out, his furred cloak flapping as if it trailed behind it infinite echoes of the harmless applause of flappers—but of more foolish women as well. As to the Italian tenor, he was uncommonly like the English actor. One could not say any worse of him than that.

"Yes, they were, after all, a very select company. They were selected by a clever if nearly crazy man as being the six men in London most likely to lay a plot to seduce his wife. Then, with great shock, I quite literally came to myself. I actually realized my own presence. I was there, too. Crome had made up a choice party of profligates and picked them carefully. And he had honored *me* with an invitation to the feast.

"That was what I was. That, at least, was what I was supposed to be. A damned dandy and dawdling blackguard, always dangling after other men's wives. . . . You know, Pond, that I was not really so bad as all that, but then, perhaps, neither were they. We were all innocent in this case; and yet the thundercloud upon the garden rested on us like a judgment. So was I innocent, in that case you remember, when I nearly got hanged for hanging round a woman I really didn't care about. But it served us right; it was our atmosphere that was all wrong—what quaint old people used to call the state of our souls, what the unspeakable bounders in the papers call sex appeal. That was why I nearly got hanged; and why there was a corpse in the house behind me. And there went through my head like the tramp of armies old lines written long ago, about

what is in legend the noblest of all lawless loves, when Guinevere, refusing Lancelot at the last, says in words that had for me a ring of iron:

*"For well ye wot that of this life
There comes but lewd and bitter strife
And death of men and great travail."*

"I had hung round all that sort of thing, and yet never quite clearly seen myself doing it, till two judgments struck me like the storm out of the sky. I nearly received a sentence from a judge in a black cap and blood-red robes, that I should be hanged by the neck until I was dead. And, worse still, I received an invitation from Lord Crome."

He continued to gaze out of the window, but Pond heard him mutter again, like the faint grumbling of the thunder: "*And death of men and great travail.*"

In the vast silence that followed, Mr. Pond said in a small voice: "What was the matter with you was that you liked being libeled."

Gahagan faced about, almost with the gesture of throwing up his hands, which seem to fill the frame of the window with his own gigantic frame; but he was noticeably pale.

"*Kamerad*, yes," he said. "I was as small as that."

He smiled at his friend, but with a glassy and rather ghastly smile, and then went on:

"Yes; I cared more for that dirty rag of vanity, worse than any vice, than I did for any vices. How many men have sold their souls to be admired by fools? I nearly did it, merely to be suspected by fools. To be the dangerous man, the dark horse, the man of whom families should be afraid—that is the sort of abject ambition for which I wasted so much of my life, and nearly lost the fulfillment of my love. I dawdled, I lounged about, because I could not give up a bad name. And, by God, it nearly hanged the dog."

"That is what I supposed," said Mr. Pond in his most prime and polite manner. And then Gahagan broke out again:

"I was better than I seemed. But what did that mean, except the spiritual blasphemy that I wanted to seem worse than I was? What could it mean, except that, far worse than one who practiced vice, I admired it? Yes, admired it in myself; even when it wasn't there. I was the new hypocrite; but mine was the homage that virtue pays to vice."

"I understand, however," said Mr. Pond, in that curiously cold and distant tone which had yet a very soothing effect on everybody, "that you are now effectually cured."

"I am cured," said Gahagan grimly. "But it took two dead men and a gallows to cure me. But the point is, what am I cured of? You have diagnosed it exactly right, my dear doctor, if I may call you so. I could not give up the secret pleasure of being slandered."

"By this time, however," said Mr. Pond, "other considerations have come in and induced you to support the insupportable charge of virtue."

Gahagan suddenly laughed, harshly and yet, somehow, heartily. Some would count his first comment a peculiar extension of the laugh. "I went to confession and the rest of it this morning," he said, "and in a vaguer sort of way I've come to confession to you. To confess that I didn't kill the man. To confess that I never made love to the man's wife. In short, to confess that I was a humbug. To confess that I am not a dangerous man . . . well, anyhow, after I'd done all that, I went on whistling, and as happy as a bird, to—well, I think you know where I went to. There's a girl I ought to have fixed things up with long ago, and I always wanted to do it; that's the paradox. But a damned sight sillier paradox than any of your paradoxes, Pond."

Mr. Pond laughed gently, as he generally did when somebody had told him, at considerable length, all that he knew already. And he was not so old, nor despite his manner so cold, as not to form some sort of guess about the actual termination of the rather exasperating romance of Captain Gahagan.

This story started with some statements about the way in which stories tend to get into a tangle, one tale being mixed up with another tale, especially when they are true tales. This story also started, and ought also presumably to stop, with the very extraordinary tragedy and scandal in the house of Lord Crome, when that promising young politician, Mr. Pitt-Palmer, unaccountably tumbled down dead. It ought really to end with a proper account of his impressive public funeral; of the chorus of praise devoted to him in the press; and the stately compliments laid on his tomb like flowers from the leaders of all the parties in Parliament; from those eloquent words of the Leader of the Opposition beginning, "Much as we may have differed in politics," to those (if possible) still more eloquent observations of the Leader of the House, beginning, "Con-

fidant as I am that our cause is independent even of the noblest personality, I yet have to lament, etc."

Anyhow, it is really very irrelevant to the central plot of this story that it should stray from the funeral of Pitt-Palmer to the wedding of Gahagan. It will be enough to say that, as already hinted, the actual effect of this shocking incident on Gahagan was to drive him back to an old love; an old love who was still conveniently young. A certain Miss Violet Varney was at that time prominent on the stage; the word "prominent" has been selected with some care from other possible adjectives. In the general view of society, Miss Joan Varney was the sister of Miss Violet Varney. In the perverse and personal view of Captain Gahagan, Miss Violet Varney was the sister of Miss Joan Varney; nor was he eager to insist on this relationship. He loved Joan but he did not even like Violet; but there is no need to enter on the entanglements of that other story here. Are not all these things written in the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel?

It is enough to say that on that particular morning, swept clear and shining after the storm, Captain Gahagan came out of the church in the little by-street and very cheerfully took the road to the house of the Varney family, where he found Miss Joan Varney pottering about in the garden with a spud, and told her several things of some importance to both of them. When Miss Violet Varney heard that her younger sister was engaged to Captain Gahagan, she went off with admiral promptitude to a theatrical club and got engaged to one of the numerous noodles of more or less noble birth who could be used for the purpose. She very sensibly broke off this engagement about a month afterwards; but she got *her* engagement into the society papers first.

"Ring of Lovers" appeared in The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond by G. K. Chesterton, published in 1936 and recently reprinted by Dover Publications, Inc.

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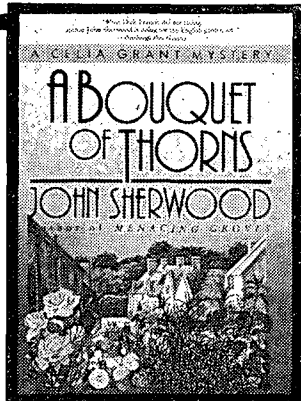
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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Some of my friends who are familiar with my reading preferences are convinced that since I moved to Texas something drastic has happened to me. I have, they point out, only profiled series about the police—series with a definite procedural leaning. “What,” they ask, “has happened to your old ‘cosy,’ amateur-sleuth self?” The answer is that my compatriot in this column, Mary Cannon, has done such a good job of covering all my favorites that I was trying to hit some different authors for you. I am still that old self, however, and to prove it, here is a thoroughly “cosy” series with a lady amateur sleuth.

Three years ago she was a wife and mother, living graciously in a posh London home;

now her husband is dead and she must earn a living. Her daughter would like her to come live with them, but she doesn’t want to give up her new-found independence. So, she earns a living tidying up neglected gardens. She is well qualified (perhaps even overqualified) for this work, having been married to a respected botanist who worked for Kew Gardens and having a horticulture degree of her own. She doesn’t look like a gardener—she is petite, with silver-grey hair (premature) and china-doll features that attract any number of aging Lotharios who think her looks mask a complete lack of brains and a tendency to romance. Of course, the Lotharios’ wives aren’t too fond of her; for they are certain their husbands

would never have made those passes if she hadn't wanted them. Naturally she has become a bit wary of men, and a bit solitary as well.

She is Celia Grant, widow of Roger Grant, for whom she has named a hybrid *Helleborus corsicus x niger*, and heroine of a series written by John Sherwood. She is assisted by the ridiculously handsome Bill Wilkins, who appears out of the blue on his motorcycle in *Green Trigger Fingers* (Scribners, 1984; Ballantine, 1986) as a suspect in a murder and ends up helping out in the plant nursery. Bill attracts women like flies, and this attraction bothers him no end, so he understands Celia's aversion to the advances of other men and appreciates her lack of any tendency to swoon all over him. Their only conflicts seem to be when Celia enlists Bill in her investigations, urging him to romance a female witness or suspect for some inside information; when she openly disapproves of his lady friend, Anthea Clarkson, who Celia thinks is "using" Bill; or when she, a workaholic who believes she is indispensable to her business, refuses to take off on some well-deserved vacation. Bill manages to convince her that the place can get along quite well without her for two brief trips: one to New Zealand, in

search of a rare Mount Cook lily which appears to be growing at the site of a proposed dam in an area totally unlike its natural habitat (*A Botanist at Bay*, Scribners, 1985; Ballantine, 1986); and one to Italy, in the place of her otherwise occupied sister-in-law, for a tour of Florentine gardens and the International Iris Competition (*Menacing Groves*, Scribners, 1988).

Gardening should be a peaceful, if backbreaking, occupation, and running a nursery and mail-order plant business is not exactly an occupation prone to crime. But Celia seems to attract bodies—they keep popping up in her perennial borders like weeds. In *Green Trigger Fingers*, she discovers not only bodies in the garden (the recently divided irises seem to have been replanted) but also an art forgery scheme. In *A Botanist at Bay*, the man who photographed the rare lily is missing, and she decides to search for him as well as the flower among the protestors against the dam. Of course, one of the protestors is murdered, so she must include this murder in her investigation, too. In *The Mantrap Garden* (Scribners, 1986; Ballantine, 1987), someone is vandalizing the gardens of a stately home, and Celia is enlisted as a member of the overseeing board to ferret out

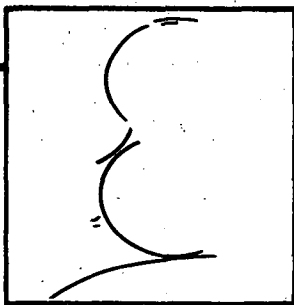
the perpetrator. When a stranger is murdered during a public tour of the garden, vandalism becomes secondary to the potential secrets harbored by the family who live in, and care for, the famous house. In *Flowers of Evil* (Scribners, 1987), a well-known officer of a thriving fabric design company has been making a fool of himself publicly, and Celia finds herself involved, since she has been hired to replant his garden for a fancy gala later in the summer. Here we meet Anthea, Bill's lady love, as well as various members of the stately family and employees of the company, which is run from the estate. In *Menacing Groves*, two odd, failed actors whom Celia had met at a particularly bad version of *Hamlet* appear on the tour of Italian formal gardens, traveling under assumed names. Two black men (South African activists?) are following the tour quite openly, and terrorists (Red Brigade?) attack the tour group, killing one couple and kidnapping the actors. In Sherwood's latest, *A Bouquet of Thorns* (Scribners, 1989), Celia starts out judging a village flower show and ends up uncovering a village scandal that has gotten Bill charged with rape, murder, and assault (the latter on a trespassing goat).

Sherwood footnotes his books liberally, making it clear that the horticultural information imparted is authentic and adding not only to the atmosphere but also the knowledge of the reader. Often the premises of the books are built around particular reference works: *The Royal Horticultural Society Journal* and Mitchell's *European Flower Painters* (Scheidam, 1981) in *Green Trigger Fingers*; Given's *Rare and Endangered Plants of New Zealand* (Wellington, 1981) in *Botanist at Bay*; Gertrude Jekyll's books on garden design (*Wood and Garden*, 1899; *Wall and Water Gardens*, 1901, and *Colour in the Flower Garden*, 1908, the latter only recently reprinted and available in most bookstores) in *The Mantrap Garden* and *Flowers of Evil*, for example.

Celia Grant is an attractive and interesting amateur detective who uses her special knowledge of plants and gardening to solve crimes in the bucolic English countryside. The characterizations are thorough, and both Celia and Bill have grown as the series progresses. The plots are sufficiently devious to keep the reader wondering until the last pages; and the style fits into the best of the British "cosy" tradition.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



In law enforcement jargon, the Q&A is the official record, based on interviews with those involved, of what happened at a crime scene. In Sidney Lumet's film of the same name, a naive young assistant district attorney finds more questions than answers on a case in which a veteran hero cop guns down a local thug.

Al Reilly (Timothy Hutton), the raring-to-go attorney, is summoned in the dead of night by the homicide bureau chief of the Manhattan D.A.'s office for what we learn is his first case.

One of New York's very finest, Lieutenant Mike Brennan (Nick Nolte) has fatally shot a two-bit hood outside an uptown social club. It's not, we discover, his first fatal run-in with the criminal element. The D.A.'s office is obligated to check it out, but it's a "cut and dried"

case, Reilly's boss tells him. Just get it all on the Q&A, he adds with a nod and a wink.

Brennan, however, is no innocent. With a larger-than-life presence on the screen, he laughs, yells, spews racial and ethnic epithets to buttress his wild stories, and is growing out of control.

Q&A is a dark police drama which raises questions of official corruption, personal greed and ambition, and morality. But with a convoluted plot, filthy language, and unbelievable relationships, it becomes more dark than drama.

Most of the movie, in fact, takes place at night or in darkened rooms, which gives the film a depressing atmosphere all by itself. Thankfully, in the latter stages of the story, the action turns to a palm-fringed Puerto Rico.

Strangely, just about the only character who comes out of the film with any scruples intact is drug mobster Bobby Texador (Armand Assante). Love wins out over lowdown greed with Bobby Tex, a Puerto Rican gangster who does business with the Mafia.

Credibility is further strained when we are asked to believe that Texador's lovely girlfriend Nancy was involved in a long-term relationship with Reilly, our intrepid A.D.A. She and Reilly were lovers and fellow law students who nearly married but for a small matter of race.

Racial, religious, and ethnic stereotypes abound in this film. We have Irish cops, Italian mobsters, and Jewish lawyers, as well as Puerto Ricans and blacks in various roles. In addition, there's a wild sexual subplot, peopled with homosexuals and drag queens to whom our killer cop Brennan is attracted. Instead of adding to the mystery cloaking the truth Reilly is seeking, that angle merely adds to the confusion.

Nolte, wearing lifts to make him even bigger, is simply despicable as Lieutenant Brennan. His intensity is threatening; the audience can practically feel him sweat. His character is turned into a loose cannon

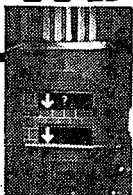
with a badge, and a bottle, who feels free to kill when it suits him or his sponsors.

As Q&A progresses, Brennan unravels. We learn why he kills and what skeletons are in various high-powered closets. But there are no well-placed, thoughtful clues along the way. We are simply told what's going on and why.

Hutton, in the role of the Irish assistant district attorney, and the son of a cop, is rather bland. But that does make for a good contrast with Nolte's character. Patrick O'Neal, as the ambitious homicide bureau chief Quinn, who asks Reilly to toe the line, can be alarmingly charming or coldly calculating. Charles Dutton and Luis Guzman perform solidly as the black and Puerto Rican detectives assigned to the case.

Lumet, whose screenplay is adapted from a novel by New York State Supreme Court Justice Edwin Torres, has been lauded for his work on such courtroom and police dramas as *Twelve Angry Men*, *Serpico*, and *Prince of the City*. But his current effort fails to measure up, and the result is merely an angry, loud, and confusing film. Even the excellent cast is unable to coax any suspense out of this story.

THE STORY THAT WON



The April Mysterious Photograph of Hollywood, California. Honor of Thomasville, Alabama; Art Shaffer of Belmont, California; P. Harriet Braun of Buffalo Grove, Illinois; and Debbie Redfeairn of Centralia, Illinois.

contest was won by Jean Stately able mentions go to Duane Riley Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Don J. Hamilton of Lewiston, Idaho;

Photo by Brian N. Cox

ONE DOWN by Jean Stately

Tension was tangible in the basement offices of the publication *Puzzles to Ponder*. Panic prevailed because of the lowering level of the list of subscribers. An employee cutback was coming. Earl, the editor, concerned about the keen competition's causing staff strife, reviewed his most recent employees' resumes. He narrowed application of the ax-choice to two, sly Sally and perky Pat. He secretly sealed an envelope containing a tricky test for the two for the next day, which Sally saw and, not above a dastardly deed, slyly steamed open. She noted its request for a new use of the question mark relating to the office and carefully re-sealed it. She now had extra hours to seek a solution.

Morning materialized, and Earl assigned the two the test. At day's end Sally submitted a design depicting a huge question mark for the magazine's cover with puzzles woven in and out. Earl grudgingly admitted he admired it, then followed Pat to the stairwell to view her new signs pointing to the basement offices. He grinned and handed Sally a pink slip. She stammered, "But these signs are stupid. What does the question mark on the top one mean?"

Earl laughingly replied, "What better pointers for puzzle loving patrons seeking our *basement* offices? To B or not to B, *that* is the question."

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BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES—Cont'd

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POWER PACKED, PROVEN AND GUARANTEED MONEY MAKING SECRETS. FREE EXCITING DETAILS. SPECTRUM PUBLISHING, POST OFFICE BOX 300453-I, ARLINGTON, TEXAS 76010.

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BEAUTIFUL ENGLISH SPEAKING Filipinas want men of all ages as Life Partners. Videos available: PAL, 51 Blanca, CO 81123-0051. 1-900-860-3033. \$3.00/per minute. Adults.

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PERSONAL—Cont'd

NICE SINGLES with Christian values wish to meet others. FREE magazine. Send age, interests. Singles, P.O. Box 310-10, Allardt, TN 38504.

SINGLE? Widowed? Divorced? Nationwide introductions! Refined, sincere people. 18-80. Identity, Box 315-DT, Royal Oak, Michigan 48068.

BEAUTIFUL GIRLS SEEK FRIENDSHIP AND MARRIAGE. American — Mexican — Philippine—European. Photo selection FREE! Latins, Box 1716-DD, Chula Vista, CA 92012.

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MAKE YOUR CLASSIFIED AD PAY. Get "How to Write a Classified Ad That Pulls." Includes certificate worth \$5.00 towards a classified ad in this publication. Send \$3.25 (includes postage) to Davis Publications, Inc., Dept. CL, 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

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MOONS' PICKLED SHROOMS. You don't have to like mushrooms to love these. For recipe, send \$5.00 to Mullins, Dept. 2, P.O. Box 346, Fallon, NV 89406.

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MYSTERY TOURS! Commemorating Agatha Christie's 100th birthday! Classic mysteries at her honeymoon hotel or Welsh Island castle! Also, mystery weekends across USA. Free brochures: Rendezvous with Murder Tours, 1001 Garnet, #600, San Diego, CA 92109. Call toll-free: 1-800-457-9515 (California); 1-800-428-7462 (Nationwide).

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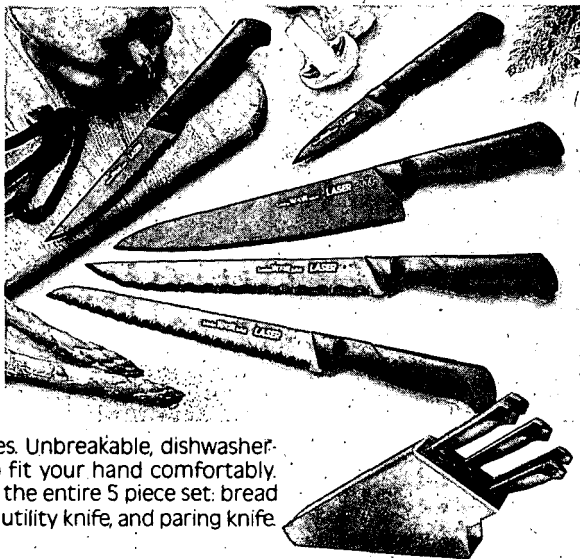
▼ CUTLERY: A CUT ABOVE THE REST

The secret behind Regent

Sheffield's new Laser 2000's cutlery is the unique machined edge guaranteed to stay super sharp for 25 years — without sharpening!

The result is a knife so sharp and durable that it comes with an unmatched guarantee: If a Laser 2000 knife ever dulls, chips, rusts, or breaks during the next 25 years, Regent Sheffield will replace it FREE! Plus, the Laser 2000's blades have a unique nonstick Xylan coating, so slicing even hard vegetables is a snap. And clean-up is a cinch because food doesn't stick to the blades.

Unbreakable, dishwasher-safe handles are contoured to fit your hand comfortably. A lovely sleek wood block holds the entire 5 piece set: bread knife, carving knife, cook's knife, utility knife, and paring knife. **\$129.98** (\$7.00) #A1933.

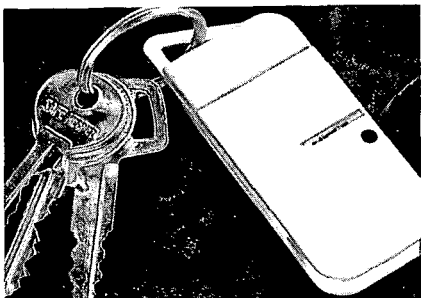


▼ THE MAGICAL SPARE BED

It's almost like pulling an extra bed out of a hat. Unlike most spare beds that gobble up storage space and are unwieldy to move, this one rolls down to fit a 36"-long, 3"-diameter canvas case, to stash in a closet corner, car trunk, camper, anywhere. Yet it unrolls in minutes to a full-size 27" x 73" bed that will even accommodate 6-footers, supports up to 500 pounds and is comfortable to boot. The secret's in the inventive construction: a cotton canvas sling is supported on laminated steel legs with 6 steel springs for cushioning and stability on rough ground. Toss the carrying strap over your shoulder and go — camping, beach, poolside; the 10" legs keep it off damp ground and sand. Of course, this bed is indispensable at home, country home, dorm — even for kids in motel rooms. A superb value at **\$61.98** (\$12.25) #A1931.

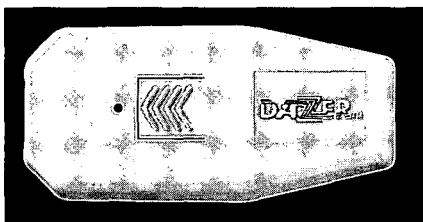


▼ EASY KEY FINDER



Key are misplaced more often than any other modern essential. Now thanks to our easy key finder your keys can tell you where you put them. Clap your hands 4 times and it will chirp electronically. Works up to 30' away. Special hybrid microchip design requires no on/off switch (other units need you to turn them ON before you lose your keys). This unit has a high-impact plastic case; weighs a mere 1/2oz; comes with its own key ring; measures only 2 1/2"x1 1/8"x3/8". Batteries and a 30-day manufacturer's warranty are included. **\$13.98** (\$3.00) #A1889; two units, **\$23.98** (\$4.00) #A1890.

▼ HELPFUL TO HUMANS HARMLESS TO DOGS



Even the most dedicated canine aficionado can sometimes encounter unfriendly dogs. Dazer™ provides a humane way to repel their advance, emitting ultrasonic sound waves inaudible to humans and totally safe for dogs (unlike mace and other common deterrents). Pocket size (4 3/4" long) plastic case can also clip on belt; takes 1-9V battery, included. For joggers, hikers, bikers, seniors and kids—plus the proverbial postman. **\$29.98**, (\$3.00) #A1829X.

▼ YES, IT DOES WINDOWS — IN HALF THE TIME

Do we exaggerate? Actually, it may take *less* than half the time you'd normally spend assembling, toting and juggling bottles or buckets, rags, a hose, a stepstool. Spray & Wipe™ combines in one implement an ample reservoir for your cleaning fluid, a spray trigger at the base and adjustable mist-to-spray head at top, plus a squeegee. At 34" long, it eliminates much climbing; is lightweight but sturdy for firm leverage on the squeegee; swivel head reaches angles. Think patio doors, shower stalls, boats, campers, windshields, et al. **\$15.98** (\$4.00) #A1865X.



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▼ YOGURT CHEESE FUNNEL & RECIPE BOOK

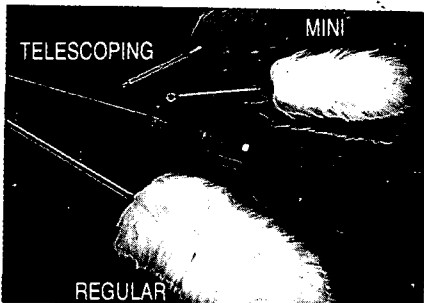


In less than a minute, you can make the newest, healthiest most economical spread — just spoon plain yogurt into this woven plastic funnel, place in the frig, in 8-14 hrs. you have really creamy cheese. Using 1½% milkfat yogurt, it has 90% less fat, ⅔ calories but over twice the calcium of commercial cream cheese. Yet most people including avowed yogurt haters can't tell the difference! Use the 142 page recipe book included or substitute for cream cheese, mayonnaise, or sour cream in your favorite recipes. Funnel holds up to 16oz. Makes about 8oz. of yogurt cheese. Our set provides 142 page recipe book, 1 funnel, you'll have enough for the lemon cheesecake shown above — scrumptious and a mere 125 calories.

\$26.98 (\$5.00)
#A1892.

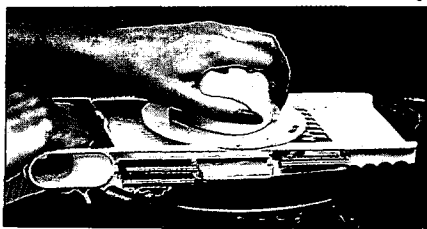


▼ DUST MAGNETS



Lambswool contains a natural static charge that makes dust literally leap off surfaces. Our dusters are imported from England. They are the fluffiest, highest quality lambswool in the world! We offer a set of four lambswool dusters: our 27" duster, our telescoping duster which extends to more than four feet — lets you reach high corners, top shelves, overhead lights and collapses to 28", and two mini dusters for extra fragile objects. **\$22.98** (\$4.00) #A1870.

▼ GOOD NATURED GRATER



The Leifheit 4-in-1 grater is a sure-grip food holder that lets you work at top speed with no fear of flaying your fingers. Molded hand-grip gives sure control, indentations seat the grater securely atop bowls from 4½" to 9½" diameter. Blades are stainless steel, store right in grater frame, and provide choice of small and large shredders, medium grater, and ground-edge slicer. The unit itself is made of tough ABS plastic, dishwasher safe. Imported from West Germany. It's the first truly civilized grater we've seen. **\$22.98** (\$4.25) #A1910.

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CUSTOMER SERVICE CALL 201-367-2900

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